



NEW LINE CINEMA

A Turner Broadcasting Company



NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET

DREAMSPAWN



A NOVEL BY CHRISTA FAUST
BASED ON CHARACTERS FROM THE MOTION
PICTURE A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET
CREATED BY WES CRAVEN

PROLOGUE

The girl lay wide-eyed in the dark, covers pulled up just below her eyes, waiting for the monster. She was seven, a big girl now, and she knew things that other kids in school did not seem to understand. They all thought that closing the closet door or having a night light could keep the monster away. They didn't know the monster like she did.

It was not some scaly, fairy tale beast with big teeth and claws. That was make-believe for babies. The real monster was liquid, transparent and smelled like floor cleaner. It lived in a bottle and when it went inside her daddy it transformed him from a regular person into a monster more terrifying than any movie. A vicious, inhuman creature with wet, red eyes and poisonous breath. When her daddy was just her daddy, he was small, pale and shaky in the harsh morning sun, but at night when he was the monster, he was ten feet tall and strong as a bear, ready to punish her for even the smallest mistake.

Of course, the girl was always bad. She couldn't help it; she had been born that way. The thing that she had between her legs was proof that she was bad. That's why the monster had to hurt her. It was the only way to make her good. Her mom was bad, too, because of that same thing, only there was no hope for her because she was too old. According to the monster, ugly black hair grew on you when you got too old, proving that you were so bad that there could be no saving you. The girl had made the stupid mistake of pointing out that the monster had hair all over, even more than her mother, and the cigarette burns he put on her legs that night as a consequence were still infected, oozing and refusing to heal. She would never make that mistake again.

The girl shifted in her narrow bed, exposing her nose and sniffing gently. The stink from Pepper was almost gone now, or maybe she was just getting used to it. It had been two weeks since the monster had found out about Pepper and been forced to punish the girl to teach her a lesson.

Pepper was a dog that had been living in the alley behind their apartment building. He was small and skinny with long, black fur and a funny, curious face like a little fruit bat. The girl had been sneaking him food for a few days and he was starting to trust her, wagging his stumpy tail whenever he saw her. But she was not allowed to have a pet and when the monster found out about it, about her giving some stray mutt the food that he worked his fingers to the bone to provide for his family, he was furious. He dragged the girl out in the back alley and made her watch closely while he used a hot dog to trick Pepper into coming over to him. She stood there, frozen, wanting to scream, to tell Pepper to run away but unable to make a sound. All she could do was watch while Pepper's little black nose wrinkled and twitched, smelling the hot dog and creeping forward with big, hopeful eyes.

"Come on over here, you little shit," the monster said in a sweet, sugary voice. "Come and take the last bite of my food that you're ever gonna get."

The girl clamped a hand over her mouth, whispering "Nonononononono," behind clenched teeth. She watched in horror as Pepper reached out his snout to take the hot dog from the monster's hand and the monster grabbed him by his scruff, quick as a snake. Terrified and shaking, the little dog licked the monster's hand and the monster laughed and picked up a brick.

The girl turned away and jammed her fingers in her ears, but the sound of the little dog screaming in pain cut right through her and the silence that followed was somehow a million times worse.

"See what you did?" the monster asked, waving the loose and bloody body of the little dog in her face. "He would still be alive if he never met you. Think about that next time you want to give my food away to worthless strays."

For the first few days after the monster put Pepper's broken body under the girl's bed as a reminder of her crime, she thought she was going to puke from the smell. By the weekend, her room was full of flies bumblng against the window and landing on her while she tried to do her homework. She could not sleep and she was terrified to

look under the bed and see what was happening to Pepper. She became convinced that he hated her for making the monster notice him and that he was going to come crawling out one night, all rotten and full of worms and ready to rip her throat out. Maybe she deserved it.

But he did not come and the smell was fading, losing its teeth. The girl had to sniff hard to catch the threads of that thick, garbagey-sweet stench. In a strange way it was like Pepper was really finally gone. She was going to miss him. He had been her only friend.

It was getting later and later, and the monster did not come. Her mom was on the couch, fast asleep from her "medicine" injection and the monster was home, but the girl didn't know where. She had heard him crashing through the living room about an hour ago but nothing since.

She lay there, listening with her whole body, but all she could hear was the low, mindless murmur of the television. Then she thought she heard something else, a kind of wet, ragged panting. It sounded like it was coming from under the bed.

Terrified and unable to move a muscle, she heard a clicking shuffle and then a soft whine. She felt the tug of a small paw scratching at the edge of the blanket.

"Go away, Pepper," she whispered, refusing to look over the edge of the bed. "Go away before he sees you."

Again that soft tug. Then suddenly, Pepper was up on the end of the bed, sitting there with his head tilted and looking totally normal, just like he did the first day she saw him.

"Get out of here," the girl said, her heart pounding in her chest. "If he sees you in here he'll kill us both."

Pepper opened his jaws wide, abnormally wide, like a crocodile, and a soft, whispery voice came out from deep inside his unmoving mouth.

"You're dreaming," Pepper said.

She looked around her familiar room and everything was suddenly wrong and different. The wall with the door on it seemed a mile away but the one with the windows was close enough to touch from her bed. Her bed seemed impossibly tall, taller than a bunk bed but the

ceiling was so high above her that it disappeared into shadow. She could still hear the TV, canned laughter from some sitcom, and the flickering light from the screen lapped under the crack beneath the distant door. She wanted to call out, but knew her mom was impossible to wake when she had taken her medicine and she was mostly useless even when she was awake. Not only that, but calling out might wake the monster.

At the end of the bed, Pepper was licking his paw. All of his toenails were black, but the ones on the paw he was licking were silvery white and dripping with dark blood. They grew longer and longer, splitting the puffy, irritated skin of his toes and he looked up at her with blood drooling from his jaws. She thought for a second that maybe he was going to attack her after all but instead he turned and jumped down off the bed. When she looked over the edge, the bed had returned to its normal height.

Pepper looked back over his shoulder at her. He was as big as a Great Dane now, bulky and hunched like a gorilla as he pushed the door open with his bloody paw. She scrambled out of bed to silently follow him.

Careful to avoid stepping on the smeary red paw prints as she made her way down the long, narrow hallway, the little girl came out into the living room. Pepper crouched by the sofa where her mother lay, oblivious in the flickering, phosphorescent wash of the television. He sat on his haunches with his head low and the one bloody paw up like he wanted to shake her mother. She made a soft, blurry noise in her sleep and rolled over.

The girl took a step closer and Pepper raised that paw above his head, only now it wasn't a paw but a hand, a person's hand wearing some kind of weird homemade glove with long, shiny knives like claws. Pepper wasn't Pepper either; he was a man, a man in a bulky black fur coat, hunkered down beside her mother. He stood slowly, letting the fur coat slither down off his shoulders and drop to the floor. It hit with a wet smack, sending a scattering of greasy, white worms bouncing across the stained carpet.

The man turned toward the girl and when she saw his face, she sucked in a shocked little whimper, clapping her hand over her

mouth.

He was burned. There was a kid in her class who had a burn on his leg where some hot oil fell on him and this man was like that all over, even his face. He had no hair on his head and there were more of those horrible worms clinging to the rough, dirty weave of his Christmas-colored sweater. He smiled at her and motioned for her to come closer.

Her muscles felt weak and sludgy from fear, but she had learned long ago what happened when you dawdled and did not do as you were told right away, so she forced her reluctant legs to scoot a little crooked side step closer to this strange and awful man.

She watched him as he picked up her mother's medicine needle off the coffee table, pinching it between two fingers of his gloveless hand as if it were something nasty, like a bug. He bent down over her mother, almost like he was going to kiss her or tell her a secret. Instead he reached out and gripped her lower lip between two knuckles of the knife hand and stretched it out and down. Her mother made a hazy, incoherent protest that ratcheted up into a choking scream when the man jammed the needle up through the meat of her lip.

She struggled and flailed as he hauled her to her feet, steering her with the needle. He turned her to face the girl and laughed, pulling her mother's lip out even farther and then slicing through the stretched skin with the knife tip of his index finger.

Her mother staggered back, crashing into the television and spraying the screen with blood. The man handed the needle to the girl. There was a chunk of meat about the size of an Oreo cookie impaled on the end. She did not want to touch it, but her body did as she was told just like she had been trained to do without any help from her brain. Standing there holding the grisly token, the girl watched the ugly man casually walk across the room to where her mother was crawling toward the door. She turned back and saw him, and started trying to crawl faster. The girl could see the whole row of her long, yellowy lower teeth, all the way down to the bleeding gums where her lip had been torn away. The man planted his foot in the center of her mother's back and gripped a handful of her dirty

bleached hair, yanking her head up and back. She screamed and screamed but then her scream melted into a hissing gurgle as the man drew his knife fingers across her throat.

She flailed on the floor for a while knocking things off shelves and thumping her head against the wall and then finally, she was still. The girl could not take her eyes off her mother's crumpled body. The skinny, blue-white arms and legs, the lank, bleach-blond hair, the stained pink T-shirt and lacy underpants. Everything about her the same as always only now she was dead, just like Pepper. Never ever going to do anything else ever, again. It was disgusting and scary but the girl could not seem to feel sad or sorry. It was like something on the television in some far away country. She just felt cold and numb.

"One down," the man said in a cheerful tone, shaking dust off a brown, old-fashioned hat and setting it on his head.

"One down," the girl repeated in a tense whisper, finally able to look away from her mother's corpse and into the face of the ugly man.

He gestured with his chin down the hallway, toward her parents' bedroom, raising the corrugated flesh above his eyes where a regular person would have eyebrows. The big bedroom. The monster's lair. Her eyes went wide.

"We can't go in there," she whispered, urgently shaking her head. "It's not allowed."

The ugly man smiled indulgently and started down the hall.

Icy terror flooded her body and any other thought vanished from her head. The big bedroom was totally off limits. She had never been inside, but she made the mistake of knocking on the door once to tell the monster that his friend was waiting outside with her mother's medicine. After that she had to miss a whole week of school until the swelling went down and her bruises healed.

She ran after the ugly man and grabbed his arm.

"Please," she begged. "You don't understand. You can't go in there while the monster's sleeping. He'll kill us."

He laughed and shook her off like a cute but irritating puppy. Her fear was huge and suffocating as he reached out and turned the knob. There was no way to make the ugly man understand the terrible

mistake he was making. It was like watching one of the little kids from the nursery school play with matches in a big puddle of gasoline. The girl had been burned by that particular gasoline so many times that her body knew the pain more intimately than her own heartbeat. She wanted to run away, but she was rooted to the hallway carpet, paralyzed by the totality of her fear.

She was afraid to even look inside the forbidden room. She thought of that awful story of Bluebeard's wife, but the temptation was overpowering and she craned her neck to see through the open door while the ugly man slipped inside as if it were no big deal.

The room was filled with piles of dirty clothing, crusted plates and trays from frozen dinners. The smell was awful: stale sweat and old vomit and most of all that bad monster smell from all those empty and half-empty bottles. And there was the monster, laying on the edge of the bed with his legs dangling over the side. He had one motorcycle boot on and one off and his jeans were down around his ankles exposing his saggy underpants. There was sticky yellow puke on his shirt and he was snoring softly.

The ugly man was standing by the side of the bed, holding a nearly full bottle. He gave the girl a conspiratorial wink and held the bottle high, as if he were about to drop it.

Was he crazy? Suicidal? Every nerve in her body was screaming for her to run and hide but she was frozen to the spot. She watched in slow-motion horror while the bottle dropped, clear liquid spilling out as it tumbled down and shattered noisily on the floor.

The monster sat up, wild-eyed and awake, reaching for his gun on the bedside table. Fear gripped the girl with seizure-like intensity and she wet herself like a baby, barely even feeling it in the overwhelming panic that surged through her body. She covered her mouth with both hands.

"Ooops," the ugly man said, throwing up his hands in mock distress.

The monster pointed the gun right at the center of the ugly man's chest.

"Who the fuck are you?"

"Relax," the ugly man said, "it's just a dream."

Almost too fast for her eye to follow, the ugly man grabbed the monster's hand, wrenching it up and away. The gun went off, the sound huge and deafening in the tiny room and the overhead light fixture shattered, raining broken glass down all around them. The ugly man slashed at the monster, opening deep, hungry looking gashes in the muscle of the monster's forearm. The monster howled and dropped the gun.

Together the monster and the ugly man grappled and fought, rolling over and over across the bed and down onto the floor. The girl felt like she was screaming but no sound came out. The ugly man kept on cutting into the monster over and over, his arms, his face, his chest and blood sprayed across the front of the girl's damp nightgown, a taste of salt and pennies on her lips. She dropped her hands to her sides as a stunning realization started creeping over her. The monster was losing. He was fighting hard, but he was getting slower and slower and every time he hit the ugly man, the man just shook it off and laughed, slicing some other place on the monster's body as if it were a game. The ugly man sliced deep into the monster's fat belly and thick purple loops like raw, wet sausages started pushing out between the monster's desperate fingers.

The girl's paralysis snapped and she ran over to where the monster lay, gasping in a puddle of foul, bloody sewage and bile. She elbowed the ugly man aside and kicked the monster in the arm.

"That's what you GET," she screamed in a kind of delirious ecstasy. "That's what you GET," she kicked him again, "when you are BAD!"

The monster reached a shaking, blood-slick hand toward her. His eyes were huge and terrified and all the monstrousness seemed to drain away while she watched, until it was just her daddy, laying there dying. Then his eyes went dull and a long slow breath slipped out of him and he wasn't anybody anymore.

In the chaotic madness of her conflicting emotions, the girl had almost forgotten about the ugly man. When he put a hand on her shoulder she screamed and flung herself against the wall, crouching down with her arms wrapped around herself.

The ugly man squatted down until he was on her level and took her face between his knife-blade fingers and his thumb, forcing her to

look up at him. She felt the blades sink into her left cheek and blood ran down her face like tears. She could smell him; a horrible dirty barbecue grill smell mixed with fresh blood and under it all, a deep, rotten stench just like Pepper. She was amazed to realize that she was not really scared anymore. Just tired.

"Are you my new monster?" she asked.

The ugly man shook his head.

"I'm here to set you free," he said.

He let go of her face and pushed a sweaty lock of hair back behind her ear, then cocked his knife hand back. It made sense to her now. They were all bad and it was the ugly man's job to kill them. She was just as bad as the monster, maybe worse. It was her fault that Pepper had to die and even though she tried so hard to learn, she just couldn't stop herself from being bad. It was better that she die now, before it was too late to save her. She closed her eyes and waited.

But the cut never came. The knives never slid into the waiting flesh of her neck. Instead she heard the distant scream of sirens getting louder and louder and when she opened her eyes, the ugly man was gone.

Policemen came; deep, grown up voices echoed through the house, but the girl couldn't make any sense of what they were saying. A tall, soft-spoken black guy wiped the cuts on her face with stingy stuff, took her pulse and asked her if she was okay. He was gentle and nice and the girl wanted to answer him, but her voice was gone. A policeman kept on asking her who did this to her, but the nice man told him to leave her alone.

When they tried to take her out of the house she screamed and fought. Didn't they understand that the ugly man was coming back for her, to set her free? How could he find her if she got taken away to some hospital? She was sure the nice man would understand if only she could find her voice, but all she could do was scream. Then the nice man gave her a needle just like her mother's and everything melted away into blackness.

ONE

One, two... coming for you...

Jane DeHaan pressed her face deep into her pillow as the orchestral dirge of her alarm clock pulled her reluctantly from vague disquieting dreams. She blindly patted the surface of the bedside table for her wire-rim glasses and placed them on her face as she sat up, meticulously inspecting her pillow and bed. Four! She carefully plucked four, long ebony strands from the sheets.

Jane threw the bedding back and slid to the floor in her favorite old-fashioned lace nightgown, the kind of nightie that reminded her of women running from monsters in graveyards. Not to mention that the generous cut allowed her to briefly forget about the overabundance of flesh beneath. She opened the bottom drawer of her dresser, a battered faux-Victorian beast, which she was slowly and carefully refinishing. Nestled in an old tin candy box, cradled in thick, acid-free, cream-colored tissue, was her prized project: a Victorian funeral wreath made of her own hair. She had been working on it for more than two years now, saving every strand from her brush, from her pillow and her bed clothes and painstakingly weaving them together in a simple but lovely repeating pattern. She carefully wound the new hairs into the mesh circle of painted wires along with all the others. Her project was more than three quarters complete now and when it was a full wreath in perhaps another six months or so, she would trim it with lace and ribbon and hang it on her wall. Another perfect addition to what was shaping up into a lovely little Victorian sanctuary. At least, until her mother moved them again and she was forced to start from scratch.

As she wove the hairs, she hummed the broken phrases of the song she heard in her dreams the night before. Lazy smoke drifted over her dream memories of showing up at school and realizing she was naked in front of her math class.

One, two... coming for you...

Three, four...

It was going to bug her all day trying to remember where she'd heard it before. *If* she had heard it before.

"Jaaane," her mother called from down the hallway. "You up yet?"

"Yes, mother," Jane replied immediately. Anything to keep her mother out of the room.

The door flung open anyway, disturbing the valances and lace panels Jane had tacked around the doorway to mimic French doors. Jane's mother thrust her head into her daughter's bedroom.

"Do I look okay?" she asked.

Jane and her mother looked nothing alike. While Jane was curvy and short, her mother was tall and skinny, utterly flat-chested with long, bony legs and lanky wrists. Jane's hair was oil-black, thick and straight and her mother's hair was thin and mousy blonde with a sort of wild, childish curl that always made her look windblown and slightly disheveled. The only feature they shared in common were large, intelligent and myopic dark eyes behind lenses of precisely identical prescriptions. Jane's mother was dressed in her usual drab polyester slacks with one of many no-nonsense, flounced blouses under a business blazer.

"Why don't you wear a dress some time?" Jane asked, "Something a little less car rental clerk and more boss-lady like. Something elegant."

Jane's mother groaned.

"It's freezing in the server room and I've got to inspect the racks today. Besides, who am I gonna impress? I work with programmers who use the stapler to cuff their pant legs and have to be reminded to change shirts more than once a week. They think anything that doesn't have a video game company's logo on it is elegant. Anyway, hurry up and get dressed. I'll give you a lift."

The last thing Jane wanted to do was show up with her mother for her first day at Hemingway High. First impressions were everything. Just ask Jane Austen. The alternate title of *Pride and Prejudice* is *First Impressions*, after all. It's very easy to misjudge a person based on that first encounter, as Lizzie discovers about

Mr Darcy in that novel. Mr Darcy. Sigh. Now that was the sort of man Jane wanted to meet and maybe marry. Dark, brooding,

handsome. Intelligent, well-mannered, and talk about elegant. Generally she believed the fewer words a man spoke, the better, but he needed to appreciate Jane's own sharp observances. Just like Mr Darcy does with Lizzie, he must appreciate her criticisms.

Carefully placing her funeral wreath back in its drawer and spreading the protective tissues over it, she closed the drawer and continued her morning routine. A breakfast of Grape Nuts with peaches and Earl Grey tea with lots of cream and sugar. The usual cleaning rituals, hair brushing and an awkward attempt at applying mascara with her nose practically pressed against the bathroom mirror. The makeup clumped and smeared despite her best technique. No matter. Beauty was only skin deep, and Jane was to conquer the world with keen intellect and advanced vocabulary instead. They had already moved her ahead a year in grade school. Who said that life itself wouldn't move her ahead after graduation?

She lazily passed the computer on her desk and booted it up. While it was booting, she wiggled into glossy black leggings and a black lace tunic with flowing sleeves. The leggings clung to her thick legs, accentuating their girth rather than disguising it, and while the tunic covered her belly and hips fairly well, it still could not completely hide her unfashionably feminine curves. Long ago, she stopped worrying what everyone else was wearing because everywhere her mother moved, the fashions changed. Belly shirts. Hip-huggers. Preposterous little scraps of disco glitter designed for prepubescent stick insects. Every few months, some new fashion atrocity would sweep the country like an unstoppable plague. Even if she had the approved boy-with-boobs body that the fashion magazines required, Jane still would not allow herself to fall into the trap of trend-slavery. If people did not appreciate her extensive collection of Victorian mourning jewelry or her shadow-toned wardrobe of old-fashioned lace and velvet, that was their loss.

She buckled her platform Mary Janes and took a moment to glance at herself in the mirror. There was no getting around that extra fifteen pounds but other than that, she was relatively satisfied. No matter what, it was still far better than the cretins at this new institute of lower learning deserved.

She stole onto her computer for a few minutes and opened Semagic, the posting software for her Live Journal. "An Elizatorian Diary." The background was wallpapered with John Waterhouse's "Lady of Shallot" with pink and darker pink borders.

"I can't believe I'm starting at yet another school today. I'll undoubtedly be surrounded by illiterate morons locked into mindless, hormone-driven male display behaviors, battling to impress twelve pound cheerleaders and prove their suitability for mating by crushing cans on their foreheads and impersonating their favorite rappers in the hallways. At least it's the beginning of the school year."

She clicked "post entry" and went to her recent entries page to look it over, admiring the coloring and how it caught Waterhouse's subtle brushstrokes of gauzy salmon.

"Jaaaane!"

"Coming."

Her mother's little Volvo rumbled like a smoker's lung as they rolled down the suburban streets. Jane had an inordinate fondness for the awful, brown breadbox of a car that had faithfully carried them all across the country. Sitting in the scratchy tan seat made her feel almost grounded as she watched the bland, generic landscape roll by outside her window. Other than the occasional palm trees and the prevalence of Spanish-style architecture, they could be driving down any street, anywhere in the United States. That was the terrifying thing about the suburbs. As soon as you left the urban centers, this mind-numbingly homogenous sprawl of brand name familiarity stole away any sense of individuality. No matter where they went, there was always a Starbucks, a McDonalds, a Barnes and Noble, a Pier One. Cookie cutter shopping malls filled with identical merchandise and identical people. You could live your whole life in the suburbs without ever having to cope with the terrifying prospect of not knowing what to expect.

The last suburb they had lived in had been just outside Seattle when her mother worked for The Evil Empire—that is, Microsoft—and Jane needed the rides or else she'd have to walk in the unending rain. Jane sneered at the sunny, postcard-perfect streets lined with

elm and white birch. She had loved the unending rain. It reminded her that she was still connected with the divine. The sun had always felt too hostile and distant to be a proper representative of anything spiritually connected to her. Of course, now that they were in Southern California, the sun would be entirely too close.

Jane shuddered at the thought of so much relentless warmth.

Her mother said nothing and let the radio burble between them, a cheerful oldies station that fed everyone the fatuous lie about how much better life used to be back in the age of malt-shop romance and *Leave it to Beaver*. Every once in a while she could persuade her mother to let her switch to a classical music station, but she had a feeling today would not be one of those times.

"Mom, can we change the station?"

"Hey, I'm driving, I choose," she said, a hand raised protectively to slap Jane's fingers away if she threatened to touch the knob. "I need something upbeat. If I have to listen to that sleepy violin funeral music you like, I'll drive into a palm tree."

Jane slouched into her seat, grumpy and silent.

"Look, we're almost there."

Hemingway High. A massive concrete prison with red painted steel pylons supporting the three stories, small windows raised high off the ground, and a domed gymnasium hunched behind the school.

They probably don't even have a decent library, but I bet they have a TV in every classroom, Jane thought drearily. And five football teams, fifty cheerleaders and a tennis instructor. Oh, let me jump for joy at this opportunity for liberal arts and college preparatory education.

Students swarmed the steps leading up to the building's double set of weighty glass doors. Predominantly white and mind-numbingly ordinary, these kids were as generic and predictable as the franchises they patronized. Yet another bland suburban school filled with bland suburban kids. She was probably just as unlikely to find a kindred soul in this swarm of conformity as she would be to find good, raw Ethiopian kitfo in the food court at the local mall. Jane's mother worriedly observed her daughter's disdain and mistook it for angst.

"You'll do great, kiddo," she said. "You always do."

"I know," Jane said, shrugging her nearly empty red backpack onto her shoulder. Her lips pulled into a tight and shallow smile.

After ensuring that Jane had the schedule and map that the school had mailed the week before, Jane's mother kissed her on the cheek and left her off on the school steps.

"Good luck, sweetheart."

Alone. Always alone.

Jane marched up the narrow steps, taking two at a time. At least it was the beginning of a school year and not the middle. She might have some hope of keeping her head down and going mercifully unnoticed. Yet, already the vultures of gossip and insult were circling, swooping, screeching as probing eyes were pecking at her clothes, hair, glasses, shoes. She found the office easily enough and checked in there before proceeding to her first period French class.

Roving packs of young males sporting athletic jerseys, bright-colored surf wear, or that apparently unavoidable gangsta-lite white rapper look, were occasionally invaded by scary young Republican types in argyle vests and polo shirts. As for the females, many wore blazers not entirely unlike her mother's, with upturned cotton collars and demure denims. Apparently a massive backlash had occurred to the skimpy fashions of the last few years. Jane was suddenly missing the belly-baring wannabe pop stars and virgin sluts. This new breed of preppies was far more frightening. Conservatism without imagination was downright Cromwellian.

While from the outside the building looked straightforward enough, on the inside the halls wound like a laboratory test for rats as the classroom numbers seemed to lindy hop back and forth in a bewildering, non-sequential fashion. Where she expected the numbers to increase, they suddenly jumped by ten or fifteen without warning, indicating some other unseen passage had swallowed her class. She didn't want to appear obviously lost, as that would immediately single her out as weak to the cruising predators, so she slumped against a concrete wall, slyly peeking into her backpack at the crumpled map.

French class, third floor of the prison, east end of the hall. Room 370. Jane walked swiftly with her head down and hands clenched at

her sides. An edge of insecurity scraped relentlessly at her insides, born out of her unfamiliarity with the territory and growing conviction that everyone around her was silently mocking her. Glossy green halls with scuffed linoleum floors elongated, nightmare-like before her as her fellow students swarmed around her like spawning salmon. Shaky relief washed over her when she finally spotted her destination; the fabled room 370.

As Jane slipped inside the classroom, she was closely followed by a little knot of girls. One blonde and one black girl stuck to a second, taller blonde girl like electrons to a nucleus as they catwalked into Room 370. Taking in their slick coifs, fresh perfume, starched preppy collars, and sculpted asses, Jane guessed that they were cheerleaders. With a prey-species' instinctive understanding, Jane knew without being told that these were the big cats of the school. The top of the bullying foodchain. And as with lions of the wild, Jane knew that the macho roar of the males was all show. It was the females who were the real danger.

Jane slipped into a seat toward the front, while the cheerleaders settled somewhere behind her, flashing her contemptuous looks that made it clear that they had noticed her, singling her out from the rest of the wildebeests as a potential easy meal. The other students greeted the trio as if they were celebrities and they sat as if they owned the classroom. Several other blondes and assorted desperate hangers-on arranged themselves near the predatory triad. The obvious queen of the clique took out a little mirror and added just a touch of sheer pink gloss to her wide and sensuous lips. She was terrifyingly beautiful in that unreal, movie star kind of way that made it impossible not to stare. Big blue eyes and slightly turned up nose, flawless skin and shampoo-ad hair. Her body was tight and toned, just curvy enough to be sexy but still maintaining a youthful waifishness in the long coltish legs and flat, perfect belly. She clicked her mirror closed and glared at Jane, making some comment out of the side of her mouth that had all her acolytes giggling behind manicured hands.

When the class found their seats, a youngish woman with wavy auburn hair and freckles in a drab olive suit stood at the front of the

class and began to address the class in French.

"Bonjour. Je m'appelle Madame Koenig. Comment vous vous appelez?"

She held out her hand to various students, who in turn said, "Je m'appelle," and stated their name. Most of them struggled with the pronunciation. She turned to Jane and asked the question.

"Comment vous vous appelez?"

Before Jane could open her mouth, the black cheerleader leaned forward, pouting her slick, red lips, and said, "Boo."

The class snickered.

That old sickening feeling knuckled Jane's stomach.

Just ignore her. If she thinks it affects you, she'll keep it up. Something told Jane that this was entirely wrong-headed, that she should stand up for herself, but she didn't want to anger the teacher.

"Écoutez," the teacher sternly demanded. Listen.

She then ordered the class to only speak French and to be courteous to the other students. At least, Jane knew what she was saying. Bitchy Brandy's lush, perfect lips were clearly better suited to French kissing than French pronunciation. Jane doubted the girl had understood a word the teacher said, even though this was second year French.

"Encore."

Jane stated with perfect enunciation; "Je m'appelle Mademoiselle Jane. Enchanté."

The boy next to her slumped with discouragement. Jane began to feel better, buoyed by her ability to scramble first to the hilltop of the subject.

Forty-five minutes later, after books had been distributed and notes taken, the bell shattered the relative quiet of the classroom. As the teacher gave out the homework assignment, the masses surged toward the door in a crush of spiral notebooks and nylon knapsacks. Jane stuffed the French book in her red backpack and slung it over her shoulder. But as she stalled behind the clog of students in the doorway, the boss blonde and one of her atomic acolytes broke away from their pride and slammed into Jane's back, crushing her against

the students in front of her. Jane inhaled as a hard little fist bruised her kidney.

"Watch it, y'fat creep. Gawd, can't you wait?" the shorter blonde spat.

"I bet she fucks dead people," the tall blonde ventured in a loud stage whisper close to Jane's ear. She raised her voice, playing to her audience. "Do you fuck dead people?"

Someone guffawed in the crowd.

The clog began to break and Jane slipped between bodies to escape in the hallway crush.

"Corpse fucker!" the shorter blonde shouted.

Jane kept moving until she lost them entirely, even though she had no idea where she was headed next. History, then homeroom? She had to check, but she didn't want to get stranded somewhere that made her vulnerable to another attack too quickly after that one. The kids here were more vicious than her previous schools. That kind of bullying was far more prevalent in junior high school than in high school. Weren't they almost in college? Wasn't this kind of stuff supposed to be forgotten by now? People ought to be discarding juvenile coping tactics and instead be embracing new responsibilities in a world that would quickly grind away their almighty youth and eventually force them to pick up their own check.

By the time Jane found refuge in a disused classroom to check her map and schedule, the next bell rang, trapping her on the opposite side of the history teacher's good graces. The history teacher didn't even look at her as she sat down. Instead he leaned on his podium and lectured the class for a seemingly endless three minutes about being tardy to his class and how he was going to be lax this time because it was the beginning of the school year, but boy, you'd best not try his patience in the future because that meant you got detention or some kind of tiresome punishment, because he sure wasn't imaginative or flexible enough to come up with a proper form of encouragement to promote prompt class arrival, but even so, as you know, you should want to be there and try your hardest to be there as promptness isn't something that should be applauded but

rather taken for granted, taken as fact, and facts were what this class was about.

Half the class glanced Jane's way at some point during this droning discourse that heralded several months of brain-scraping monotony. Jane had tried so hard not to do anything that made her appear weak and instead drew the ire of everyone in class by being late. How was she supposed to know that this... Mr Fielding... was an unmitigated bore with a mustache that hung wetly on his lips like a drowned muskrat? Mon Dieu! This was hardly her fault. She resisted comparing the mustache to a millipede. The innocent millipede was far too beautiful to be sullied by such a comparison.

She hoped desperately that, by the time Mr Fielding's class had ended, everyone had forgotten what she had made them endure. But as the students plowed out of the classroom at the end of period, she overheard a couple of them snickering.

"Corpse fucker."

Word traveled fast. There were five hundred kids at this school, her mother had told her. It wasn't likely she would be forgotten, once noticed.

Not far from the history class, and with no mysterious numbering issues appearing between, homeroom was much easier to find. Thank goodness. As soon as she crossed the threshold, the tall blonde who'd called her a corpse fucker grabbed a friend's arm and whispered to her other friends who sat nearby, glancing significantly at Jane all the while. She pulled out one of those awful germ-killing breath strips and set it on her perfectly pink tongue, then twisted her lips into a smirk.

The last thing Jane wanted was this bitch in her homeroom. The whispering burned her with alienation. No matter who else she might eventually encounter in that room, she could never ignore that someone at hand hated her. And somehow that hate would shadow her everywhere she went, always scratching the back of her head with long ragged nails. She had hoped this school would be different and that her senior year would help her break out of the usual role of brainy fat girl and be someone else. Instead, the girls continued to whisper and cover their mouths as they laughed.

A variety of students crowded the dilapidated seats. A thin, curly headed guy with bad acne hunched over his laptop in the farthest corner of the room, while a pale, round-eyed waif sniffled over a fantasy novel pressed close to her face, her black clarinet case on the desk. There sat a young man in a button-up cotton dress shirt whose soft eyes and thin fingers most certainly got him beaten up on a regular basis. There a heavysset boy with shaggy hair, braces, and thick glasses wore an utterly unfashionable light blue nylon jacket. The black elastic ribbing at the bottom rode up far too high, drawing attention to the white, oversized shirt spilling over his waist. A deep depression burned in his brown eyes. Most of the other kids were not remarkable or interesting in any way. They hid what little character they had behind trendy outfits and identical phrases and gesticulations. Uniformity spread with Mussolini efficiency across the words, actions, and clothes of Jane's so-called peers.

Jane knew better than to look for anyone with whom she might share some camaraderie. Such a thing rarely existed. When she did find it, the winds of fate tore it from her grasp. She never understood why her mother changed jobs so often. Why didn't they stay in one big city where the technology companies lived? They were happy in Washington for nearly a year, but then the bubble broke and Microsuck scythed a couple thousand jobs. Ever since, there was no solid work. She seemed to keep getting drawn into startups that promised futures but never turned a profit. They always needed a database administrator. But the instability rocked them from home to home. The big mistake had been moving to Minnesota for that one job. The winter was brutal; colder than Jane thought possible. She had never seen snow like that before, nor had she ever contended with such negative temperatures and vicious wind-chill factors. The people there seemed crushed down inside themselves like banked fires, grim and humorless Scandinavian faces as cold as the vast and steely gray sky. By comparison, Southern California would be a walk in the park.

Then, as the homeroom teacher took roll, Jane's bored gaze drifted toward a television that sat dead and unplugged on a cart with an old VCR in the far corner of the room. Why didn't that surprise her?

They would probably watch foolish, romanticized Hollywood movie versions of the literary classics, rather than be forced to endure the tedious task of actually reading. Typical.

"Jane DeHaan?"

"Here."

The television screen vaguely reflected the movements of the students in its monochrome face, but Jane was sure she saw something else there, buried deep beneath the surface.

Three, four... better lock your door...

"Amber Dunn?"

"Present," the tall blonde girl responded as if she were about to jump up and thank the academy. So, her name was Amber Dunn. Amber Dumb. Amber Duncie. Amber Duh.

Somewhere, a faint snarl like a distant car engine. Jane swiveled her head and looked around, but could not detect where this noise was coming from. Outside? There was no window in this room. A radio? Was it possibly someone's cell phone ring? Or maybe it was the curly headed guy's laptop? The growl of the engine grew louder and its source was suddenly clear. It was coming from the television. The engine revved, roaring ominously and under that echoed a man's laugh. A deep, belly-hollowing laugh that rippled through Jane, dread sluicing her stomach lining. Then, wheels peeled with an earsplitting *screet!* and suddenly the glass exploded in a wash of white hot light, a gray blizzard of thick shards spraying across the room as a thick fountain of blood geysered from the broken screen.

Jane inhaled with terror and drew back, hands covering her face, but no glass or blood rained on her hands or desk. She lowered her hands and a big jock next to her let out a brainless laugh that echoed from the bottom of his empty skull.

"What's the matter, fat ass? Scared of the TV?"

Jane had no idea what had just happened. The scrawny, oddly genderless teacher approached Jane's desk, lightly placing a hand on the surface

"Are you all right? Do you need to see the nurse?"

.

Jane shook her head. The jock continued to jabber about her reaction, throwing his hands in front of his face as he imitated her previous moment's terror and then laughing at her as he leaned toward her desk. A couple of other boys mocked her with him, their own acne and greasy hair notwithstanding. ("Pot! Kettle's on the phone.") The teacher did nothing to shut him up. Typical. So often the teachers thought the cruelty of students was "normal" and "what teenagers do" to one another. She turned to the jock and spoke, words tumbling out in a breathless rush.

"You're going to fail English this semester and they won't let you play whatever brainless sport you use to give you an excuse not to learn anything else. It almost happened last year, but this time you'll screw it up for sure and your mother will drink herself into an almost permanent coma."

The boy's eyes widened as his face shed its mirth.

Jane smirked. She wasn't sure where the hell that came from, but it sure seemed to bloody the good time he was having at her expense.

The girl seated behind her tapped her shoulder.

"Oh, Jane?"

When Jane didn't respond, she repeated her name.

"Jane? Aren't you Jane?"

The way she said the name was blistering yet mechanical. As if she was repeating the name of a convict serving time in her ward.

Jane swiveled in her seat.

"What?" she asked, half expecting some kind of taunt.

Instead, the girl sitting behind her held up an open cell phone. She wore a blue head band that held her smooth red hair away from her knife-edge cheeks. She was as thin as a fashion model, arms nothing but pale, freckled skin shrink-wrapped onto thin, birdy bones. Her tiny wrists clattered with bangles.

"Say cheese," she said.

The phone clicked. Damn. The girl had taken Jane's picture. Lord knew what was going to happen to it. She pretended she didn't care and swung back around in her seat to face the now untroubled television. The shock of her inexplicable vision still made her anxious. For some reason this school was far worse than the others

and Jane had managed to make every bad impression possible. She needed to take the cue from her fellow geeks who buried their heads in books and computers to escape notice. The jock was now picking on the waif with the fantasy novel, making insipid comments about the title and trying to bully her into telling him what it was about.

What do you care? Jane thought. You probably couldn't read the instructions on a tube of anti-fungal jock-itch cream.

But she didn't say anything. Instead, she pulled out the map and located her third period class. Advanced Chemistry.

When the bell rang, the waif stuffed her book into her backpack and grabbed her clarinet, head down as she deftly cut through the other students on her way out. The heavysset boy more or less waddled out of the room, fallen arches smashing the ridges of his loafers. Loafers. Jane ached with embarrassment for him. She herself was just a little overweight, yet she was constantly comparing herself to every other girl's body. Imagine what it was like to be as big as that guy. If there were any other taunts as she made her way to the chemistry class, she did not hear them. Her heart instead went out to every geek and his or her humiliation.

The rest of the day evened out a bit, especially as she moved into the advanced classes. More geeks, less harassment. The teachers seemed to appreciate her more. The banter was a little more sophisticated. And she began to get the hang of the weird hallway thing, although it never entirely made sense to her.

She walked home alone.

The California heat beat down on the part in her hair, roasting her skin and making her sweat in her black nylon leggings. God. She would have to change the moment she walked through the door. She passed a 7-11 and a supermarket and then turned the corner and entered her forgettable new neighborhood. As she navigated the monotonous suburban streets, the song from the dream grew in her head. She hummed, letting the tune skip and fall.

Three... four... shut the door.

Five... six... grab your cru-ci-fix.

One... two... coming for you.

Coming for you. But who?

TWO

Jane stood in the corner of the gymnasium, wishing the glossy wooden floor would open up and mercifully swallow her. It was well into her second week at Hemingway High and it just seemed to get worse and worse. She was dressed in her usual gym clothes: baggy black sweatpants and a loose T-shirt silk-screened with an Edward Gorey bat. Her feet were squeezed into ugly modern sneakers whose only virtue was that they too were black. Her long braids were coiled in a figure eight at the nape of her neck and her cheeks burned with thick, crimson heat.

Physical Education was always a humiliating nightmare for Jane. She was awkward and uncoordinated and every exercise seemed deliberately designed to make her look fat and pathetic. Growing up, Jane's physical body always seemed like nothing more than a carrying case for her agile and active mind; an occasionally cantankerous but generally reliable life support system that got her from point A to point B with minimal attention. Ever since puberty, her body began asserting itself, pestering her with ridiculously primitive longings and destroying the safe, neutral shape of her childish form with an overabundance of feminine curves. When she was younger, she was often able to get out of gym because of childhood asthma, but she had since grown out of that lucky malady and now she found herself subject to shameful and unspeakable horrors such as dodge ball and push-ups.

The class was picking teams for basketball. Jane wondered if teachers had any clue what an ordeal the picking of teams always was for the less than desirable students. Unsurprisingly, Jane's newfound nemesis, the ubiquitous Miss Dunn, was the captain of one team. A tall and athletic black girl with mannish shoulders and corn rowed hair was the opposing captain. There were only two students remaining to be chosen. One was a scrappy tomboy with ratty purple hair and Eurasian features; a strong, defiant chin and wide set, golden hazel eyes with distinct epicanthic folds. She wore a black tank top that read GOREHOUND in large drippy red letters and her

ensemble was completed with unevenly cut-off jeans, ugly children's knee socks covered with Halloween pumpkins and battered black Converse Felony Fliers. The other unchosen student, of course, was Jane.

"Lesbo Lola or the Corpse Fucker?" Amber said, holding a finger to her chin in an exaggerated pantomime of thoughtfulness. "Hmmmmmm..."

"What a choice," one of her acolytes said. "Geek and Geek-er."

"Well, Kayla," the scrawny redhead said to the black girl in Amber's trio, drawing the first syllable out long and juicy. "We are all alive, so it's not like we have to worry about the Corpse Fucker trying to grab our boobs."

"Yeah right," the tomboy sneered. "Even if I wanted to, I'd need tweezers and a microscope to find your triple As, Shayne."

"Fuck off, Lesbo."

Ms Tanner, the gym teacher, blew her whistle. She looked like a bitter, aging fitness model whose sculpted, leathery physique was clearly the only thing she had left to hold on to. Her thin, bleached hair was scraped up into a severe ponytail and the corners of her mouth were turned down in a disapproving scowl.

"Enough, ladies," she said. "Cole, you're with Mason, DeHaan with Dunn. And Cole, I want proper athletic wear in my class from now on. No more cut-offs, is that understood?"

The tomboy rolled her eyes and reluctantly went to join Mason's team. Jane stood frozen for what felt like a century. Just when it seemed that life couldn't possibly get worse, here she was, teamed up with the enemy. Unbelievable. Jane forced her feet to move her body across the gym to where the snickering cheerleaders stood in their hip, low-rise microfiber yoga pants and sporty, midriff-baring tank tops that showed off toned and flawless abs. They all seemed sleek, athletic and graceful, like escapees from a Super Bowl sneaker commercial. Jane felt like an albino hippopotamus trapped out of water and dumped in the midst of a herd of gazelles.

Jane had only the most rudimentary understanding of this foolish game called basketball. Bounce the ball against the ground with one hand and try to throw it up into the basket. Jane knew she was in no

danger of actually scoring any points or even getting to bounce the ball at all, so she mostly tried to stay out of the way and avoid falling down while trotting from one basket to the other, following the rest of the girls and hoping to look involved enough not to fail the class. She couldn't help but notice the purple-haired tomboy across the court, barely moving faster than a stroll and making no effort whatsoever to participate. Jane caught her sullen gaze and a cynical smile curled in one corner of the other girl's mouth.

Distracted for a second by the brief, unexpected scrap of camaraderie, Jane did not see Kayla turn and throw the ball directly at Jane.

"Heads up, CF," she shouted.

Jane turned toward the sound of the girl's voice just in time for the orange meteorite of the ball to slam into her face, knocking off her glasses and making her eyes water with shock and pain.

Waves of laughter spread through the gym as Jane fell over, sprawling gracelessly on her ass. She landed on her glasses, feeling the delicate frames twist beneath her weight.

"Sorry," Kayla said, making it clear with her facetious, singsong tone that she was not.

Jane fumbled for her glasses and hooked them over her ears with shaking hands. Sure enough one lens was cracked, blurring her vision just enough to plant the seed of what would eventually become a bitch of a headache.

"DeHaan," Ms Tanner said. "Will you kindly pay attention? Save the daydreaming for your own time."

The bell rang then and the herd broke apart, heading for the locker room. Ms Tanner gave Jane a contemptuous look and grabbed her arm, hauling her to her feet.

"You're just not making any effort to be part of the team," Ms Tanner said. "I won't stand for slackers in my class, is that understood?"

The teacher leaned in and raised her eyebrows, as if imparting critical wisdom.

"Every pound over your ideal weight increases your risk for heart disease by ten percent. You need to get on top of this weight problem

now while you are still young or you'll live to regret it."

Jane was speechless. She forced her head into something like a nod, burning with shame and humiliation. Her mind scrambled for some witty comeback but nothing came. Ms Tanner gave Jane a last scornful once-over and then turned away leaving Jane standing there like a spanked child.

"You okay?" a voice behind Jane asked.

She turned to face the tomboy with the purple hair. Suspicious of anything but the expected contempt from other students in this scholastic hell, Jane frowned, squinting through her cracked glasses.

"I'm fine," she muttered.

"Well, you know what they say," the tomboy said. "Whatever doesn't kill you..."

"Makes you stronger," Jane replied wearily. "I know that's supposed to be true but when is it going to happen? I don't think I can wait much longer."

That was by far the single, longest conversation Jane had had with a fellow student since her arrival and she wrapped her arms around herself, feeling uncomfortably shy all of a sudden.

The tomboy laughed and shook her head.

"Just one more year and we're out of this zoo," she said. "We better get changed or we'll be late for whatever soul-killing torment is coming up next period."

Now it was Jane's turn to smile.

"Algebra," she said.

"Shop," the tomboy replied.

"See you around then," Jane said.

"You bet," the tomboy said. "Oh, by the way, I'm Lola Cole. And I'm not a lesbian."

"Well, I'm Jane DeHaan, and I'm not a corpse fucker," Jane replied, smiling a little. "Not that I'd care if you were a lesbian."

"Well I wouldn't care if you fucked dead people," Lola said, smirking. "Though personally, I like making corpses better than making it with 'em."

Jane frowned, thrown. "What do you mean you like making corpses?" she asked. "You mean killing people?"

"Jeez, nothing like that," Lola replied. "I'm a special effects artist. I sculpt corpses and monsters and all kinds of fun stuff. When they let me out of this prison for the criminally hip, I'm moving to Hollywood to work in the film industry. You like horror movies?"

"I mostly just read," Jane said.

Lola nodded and shrugged. Jane seemed to have almost nothing in common with this brash, punk rock tomboy, but yet she sensed a weird sort of outsider kinship between them that made her feel better than she had in weeks.

Suddenly the bell rang a second time.

"Ah shit." Lola said. "Late again." She turned to run. "Catch you later, Jane DeHaan."

Jane smiled and waved.

The locker room was deserted, so Jane took a chance and quickly skinned off her gym clothes. Trying to spend as little time as possible exposed in her big, black granny panties and thick functional bra, she pulled on her black pantyhose, long, gauzy skirt, and charcoal velvet tank top. She would never risk undressing in front of her classmates but since she was so late and thus alone, she was able to change quickly and without having to lock herself in a bathroom stall.

She had her Mary Janes on her feet, her red backpack on her shoulder and her gym clothes stowed when she heard a soft, sliding footstep. Whirling to face the sound, she saw a little girl standing near the showers. Curious, she took a step closer.

The child was about seven, pale and silent in a faded pink nightgown. She held a little black dog in her arms and the dog's body seemed limp and lifeless, lolling against her chest. There were a few specks of blood on the front of her nightgown.

"Are you okay?" Jane asked. "What happened to your dog?"

The child said nothing, but without warning, she looked up and past Jane, gasping, eyes wide in terror. Jane whirled, adrenaline racing in her veins. There was no one behind her and when she turned back, the girl was gone.

Jane wasted several minutes searching the empty locker room, but there was no one there. That was the second time her imagination had gotten out of control in this school. Could it be stress from the

constant bullying? She did not know, but she was now nearly ten minutes late for Algebra, a class she actually liked, with a sympathetic, intelligent teacher.

When she finally staggered into class, muttering apologies and sliding into an empty desk, Mr Fong frowned at her. Then she saw him register the crack in her glasses. Instead of scolding her, he nodded wordlessly and turned back to the board to continue writing out an equation. It was as if he could tell what had happened and understood. Mr Fong was five foot three at most with thick glasses, bad skin and a clipped, Chinese accent. He dressed in an unchanging uniform of navy pants, a white, short-sleeved button-up shirt and one of three cheap, variously striped ties. Jane imagined he had gotten his glasses broken more than once back when he was in high school.

After that class was over, Jane escaped out the side door, amazingly avoiding any further confrontation. Must be fellatio practice for the cheerleading squad or something equally important because her personal tormentors were nowhere to be found. When she made her way around the front, she saw Lola off to the side of the crowd. She had changed clothes and was wearing awful, green and orange plaid, old man pants rolled up to the knees, a T-shirt with the words FULCI LIVES in red over a rough, black and white zombie head and clunky combat boots spattered with plaster and paint and a million other unidentifiable substances. She was idly popping a skateboard on and off the edge of the curb by the front steps and when she saw Jane, she zipped over and then stepped hard on the tail of the board, causing it to flip up into her hand. The underside of the board was hand-painted with an impressively vile tableaux of half-naked female zombies ripping apart a screaming man.

"What's up, Jane?" Lola said. "Need a lift?"

Jane eyed the gory skateboard doubtfully. "On that?"

Lola laughed. "No, silly, in my hot rod." She gestured toward a battered, primer-coated Dodge minivan. Its bumper was plastered with stickers of bands that Jane had never heard of and horror movie monsters.

"You have a car?" Jane asked, incredulous.

"Where are you from, Mars?" Lola fished the keys from her pocket. "This is sunny Southern California, baby. It's illegal to be over eighteen and not have a car."

"I'm not from anywhere," Jane said. "I've moved too often to claim loyalty to a single town."

Lola looked curiously at Jane and then opened the passenger door. "Fair enough," Lola said, heading around and slipping behind the wheel. "You coming?"

"Sure," Jane replied, hesitating for a moment before settling into the passenger seat. She had meant to decline the offer of a ride, but somehow there she was.

Lola keyed the ignition and the little van rumbled like a tank, rowdy punk rock blaring from the crackly speakers. There was an air freshener shaped like a skull, some purple beads and a big gory eyeball with long red roots hanging from the rearview mirror. The seats were covered in hideous, lime green, zebra-striped fur and the back was filled with junk: large, white plastic buckets, jugs of artificial blood, old newspapers, tools, plastic tarps and what looked like the front half of a rabid poodle, mounted on a four-foot pole. In the center of the dashboard stood a kitschy, wobbling hula girl, only she had been repainted in dead, rotten green and gray, her little face slashed with open red wounds and one eye gouged out.

"Sorry," Lola said, turning down the music. "I don't normally have riders."

Jane smiled and shook her head.

"So where are you living now?" Lola asked.

"On Tamarind Street, number 315, just off Hillcrest."

"By the Von's?" Lola pulled out of the school lot.

"You mean that huge supermarket, right?" Jane started to feel lighter as the hulking school building shrank away in the rearview mirror.

"Yeah, next to the carwash."

"That's right."

"No shit, that's like three minutes away from me. I'm behind the bowling alley on Vista. We're practically neighbors."

Jane felt that strange wave of shyness again. Here was someone she could almost imagine being friends with, someone who was an outsider like her, an ally in the hostile war zone of Hemingway. Yet she was almost afraid to take the chance, as if exposing herself to friendship was just asking to be hurt. It would be safer to keep everyone on the outside, to remain alone. But it would be so nice to talk to someone, to share a joke, an arched eyebrow, or a cynical comment.

But before Jane could say anything else, they were suddenly in front of her latest house.

"Here you go," Lola said.

"Thanks," Jane said, shouldering her pack. "I guess I'll see you Monday."

Lola reached into the glove box and pulled out a business card, offering it to Jane. It had clearly been made on a home printer and said LCFX in scratchy red letters like knife cuts. Beneath that it read: Gore and Creature FX, Pretty and Ugly Makeup and More, and below that an address and phone number.

"Give me a call if you're bored over the weekend," Lola said. "You can come down to the shop and hang out."

"Sure," Jane said, slipping the card into her knapsack. "Thanks."

She stood there, watching Lola's minivan pull away and tear off down the quiet street. Her eye was drawn to a bumper sticker that said: Who will survive and what will be left of them?

A weird, anxious shudder passed through her but she shook it off, fished her keys from her knapsack and let herself into the empty house. She stood in the cool hallway, feeling eternally grateful that her mom was not home to interrogate her about her new friend.

Jane spent most of Saturday in her room, reading and puttering around, organizing things and putting up some of her framed death portraits. As she stood, squinting in her spare glasses and holding a photograph of a pale, serene, deceased young lady sitting on a plush divan with a lifeless baby in her arms, Jane found herself thinking of

Lola's comment about making corpses. She thought how cool it would be to get Lola to make her up like a corpse and photograph her in that old, soft-focus black and white. She wondered if Lola would appreciate her collection of death portraits or if they were too stiff and old-fashioned. Not gory enough. Smiling, Jane supposed Lola preferred her corpses to be shambling around and eating people's brains.

Lola answered her phone on the first ring. "LCFX," she said.

"Hi, Lola, it's Jane."

"Oh hey, how's it going?"

"Just getting settled over here." Jane looked down at the photo of the dead lady. "Listen, what are you up to?"

"Not a goddamn thing," Lola replied. "I just finished the rough cut of my zombie dog movie and was sitting here thinking that it wasn't too late to look into that career in the food service industry."

"I'm sure it's brilliant," Jane said.

"It's visual Alpo," Lola said. "I thought I was pushing the envelope but now it just seems trite and childish. Like showing the kids in the lunchroom your chewed up food. Ugh!"

"I'm sure you're being too hard on yourself," Jane said. "Maybe you should give it a rest for a few days and then come back to it with fresh eyes."

"Yeah, you're probably right." Lola sighed. "Well, wanna grab a burger?"

"Um... sure." Jane wrapped the portrait of the woman and the baby back up in bubble wrap and slid it into her knapsack. "I have something I want to show you."

Jane met Lola in a faux fifties-style franchise diner called Daddy-O's, next door to the Vista Lanes bowling alley. The decor was all standard issue: red and white checks on the floor, red vinyl booths and framed reproductions of ad art for finned cars and discontinued products. The waitresses were dressed in sexy, pseudo-fifties red and white uniforms featuring each girl's name embroidered on the left

breast. Their waitress was heavily tattooed and sporting weird, greasy, half-bleached Carol Brady hair. Her name was, apparently, Fifi.

The girls gave Fifi their order: a cheeseburger with fries and a chocolate shake for Lola, and a turkey club sandwich and grape soda for Jane. While they waited, Jane took out the portrait and slid it across the table to Lola.

"Is this for real?" Lola asked.

Jane nodded. "People took portraits of their dead loved ones to remind them of how they were in life."

"Just like in *The Others*." Lola brushed a finger over the dead infant's face beneath the glass. "That's so cool."

"The what?"

"You know, *The Others*. That ghost story with Nicole Kidman where she doesn't know she's dead. She finds a whole album of pictures like this."

"Didn't see it." Jane said.

"You might like it," Lola said. "Not much in the gore department, but a pretty cool story."

"The Gore Department?" Jane smiled. "Sounds like a bad comic book about cannibal FBI agents or something. Anyway, I have a pretty decent collection of death portraits at this point. It's just hard to collect anything when you have to keep moving. The glass gets broken." She paused while Fifi clunked down their drinks. "Still, there's a kind of peaceful stillness in these portraits. They never change no matter where I go."

Fifi frowned and hustled away as if they were contagious. Lola smiled.

"I'd love to see the rest of them some time," she said, banging her straw against the tabletop to break it free from its paper sleeve.

"Sure," Jane replied. She looked down at the photograph. "Do you think you could do a portrait like that of me? You know, as if I were dead?"

A big, genuine smile broke across Lola's face. "Hell yeah," she said. "No problem. I can even fake that old photograph look in Photoshop. It'd be great!"

"Tomorrow?" Jane sipped her soda.

"No time like the present," Lola replied.

Jane sat in Lola's makeup chair with paper towels over the shoulders of her black turn-of-the-century shirtwaist. She wore a tiny veiled hat featuring a pair of real stuffed hummingbirds and a long, rustling skirt that was modern but passable. She watched with silent awe in the paint-spattered mirror while Lola used sponges and brushes to steal the bloom from her cheeks and shadow her eyes until they seemed sunken in her head. It was quite disconcerting to see herself as a corpse.

Lola's shop was in the huge, four-car garage of her parents' sprawling, ramshackle house. Lola's mother was Malaysian, a sculptor who gave pottery classes, and her father a burly blond American, the owner of a small hardware store. Their house was filled with strange, vaguely sexual yet nonrepresentational clay sculptures and seemed in a state of perpetually incomplete home improvement. Lola's world was completely self-contained and unconnected to the main house. She had a loft bed, and an ancient and ugly orange sofa in front of a big screen TV with a stack of interconnected VCRs, a satellite scrambler, and multi-region DVD players.

Horror movie posters plastered the walls between functional metal shelves packed with strange and horrible things. Monster heads and severed limbs. Jars filled with eyes. A pile of tongues. A full-sized human corpse with its insides hollowed out hung from the rafters like a gutted deer. Several frighteningly realistic zombie poodles in various degrees of injury and decomposition. There was a massive, blood and latex-spattered worktable, a deep, glass front commercial fridge, a large stove and bulky industrial sink but curiously, no bathroom. That was apparently the only reason Lola would ever have to leave her little sanctuary.

"I don't know why Amber Dunn and the cheerleading hit squad have it out for you the way they do," Lola said, dabbing purple

shadows beneath Jane's cheekbones. "I mean, they've been after me since the dawn of time, for all the obvious reasons. I've had my locker plastered with girl-girl porn, had nail polish poured into my backpack, been locked in the art supply closet, the works. But now they just can't seem to get enough of you."

Jane shrugged and Lola scolded her not to move.

"I don't know," Jane said, trying to speak while barely moving her lips. "Geek pheromones maybe? I get that sort of thing all the time no matter where I go. I'm starting to feel like a permanent outsider."

"Yeah well, someone needs to put those bitches in their place and teach them a lesson." Lola brushed fine white powder over Jane's face. "You're done."

Jane stood and let Lola lead her to the prepared backdrop, an antique chair nabbed from the main house and set against a smooth, dove-gray colored screen.

"That would be great but how?" Jane asked, sitting in the chair and arranging her skirts.

Lola adjusted her lights and hefted her camera. "It's not impossible," Lola said. "You need to hit 'em where they live. Turn the shame and humiliation back on them."

Jane sat up primly in the chair and closed her eyes, imagining herself stiff and cold. "I don't know," Jane said between flashes. "It's like hunting lions. What if you miss?"

"Actually, I have a plan," Lola said. "It's a good one too. The thing is, I need someone to help me. I can't do it alone."

"Really?" Jane frowned. "What is it?"

Lola held up a finger, slipped away behind the set and returned with an actual stuffed tabby cat. She set the deceased feline on Jane's lap; its stiff, dusty bulk felt strange against her legs. Lola snapped a few more shots.

"Why?" Lola asked. "You in?"

Jane held the dead cat and felt a cold excitement creeping through her belly. A chance to get back at her tormentors, to make them feel what she felt every day, was just too delicious to pass up. Revenge for all the humiliation of all the geek girls in all the world.

"Tell me," Jane said.

THREE

"Are you sure about this?" Jane asked, standing by the van door with her arms wrapped around her body. They had been over and over their plan during the week after Lola shot Jane's death portrait and they both had every move planned down to the second but Jane still felt agonizingly nervous.

Lola grinned and gave her the thumbs up.

"Come on," she replied. "Don't wimp out on me now." She held up both hands in curled G shapes. "Geek girls are go."

Jane reluctantly raised her own fists like Gs and tapped her knuckles to Lola's.

"Geek girls are go," she repeated, a mite tremulously.

Across the street was the Dunn house, a big, expensive, Spanish-style villa. It was infested with teenagers like a hedge with whiteflies. Bass-heavy music rattled the windows in their frames and the lovely, Mediterranean garden was littered with beer cans and passed-out students. Grating, hysterical laughter clashed with waves of primate-like hooting and the occasional liquid gush of copious vomiting. Jane was utterly horrified. It was as if everything she hated most in the world had been condensed down into a single location.

"Where are her parents?" Jane asked.

"France? Acapulco? Timbuktu?" Lola shrugged. "Who knows?"

"And you're sure they'll be gone for two weeks.".

Lola nodded. "At least," she said. "Amber is the textbook definition of a latch key kid. Her jet set parents had a baby because it was trendy at the time, and now that she's not a puppy anymore, it's a miracle if they remember to leave bowls of food and water for her when they leave town. Her parties are legendary for total lack of adult supervision."

Cocky as always, Lola bulled her way across the yard and elbowed through the crowd around the open door, hauling Jane in her wake. It was easily ten degrees hotter inside the house and packed with sweating teenage bodies. It was as if the poor house was sick and feverish with this horrible parasitic infection. Everywhere Jane

looked she saw some thoughtless atrocity perpetrated against the house. Cigarettes were being ground into the lovely imported tile. Half empty beer bottles drooled their warm contents across the tasteful Spanish leather sofa. All around her were distorted, drunken faces and meaningless, empty conversations. She fantasized idly about poisoning the keg with a nice strong dose of antihuman penicillin to kill off the infection and save the house.

They continued through the crowded rooms and hallways like Dante and Virgil traveling through the levels of Hell. A crimson-faced young man lay draped across the top of a piano while his compatriots stuffed a tube into his gaping mouth and poured alcohol into a funnel at the other end. A wobbly blonde girl in too-high designer heels scootched along a hallway with her cheek pressed against the wall as if it was the only thing holding her upright. They found a small, inexplicable scattering of tiny female underwear, G-strings so skimpy they might have been mistaken for eye patches, littered across the carpet beside an empty bottle of champagne. They followed a long, dim corridor to a candlelit bedroom suite filled with amorous couples struggling to get as close to actual penetration as possible while still remaining mostly clothed.

"Where's Amber?" Lola screamed over the music into the ear of a grinning jock lounging against the doorway.

The jock pointed to a closed door at the far end of the room and then raised his fist to his mouth, poking his tongue into his cheek in imitation of fellatio. Lola rolled her eyes and shook her head.

Jane followed Lola as she threaded her way around the grinding bodies. A thick, slurry female voice spoke up from somewhere under a muscular male body.

"Hey," it said. "It's Lesbo Lola. This is a straight party. No lesbos allowed."

Drunken giggles from the girls and several male heads rose up with inevitable Pavlovian interest at the word "lesbo."

When they finally reached the indicated door, it was opened by a staggering senior with his zipper down and a dumb grin on his face. He slapped Lola on the back.

"She's all yours, Lesbo."

Jane arched a brow at Lola, silently telling her to stay cool. Lola nodded in response to Jane's unspoken command and together they pushed open the door and entered the darkened bathroom beyond.

They found Amber slouched on the closed toilet, cheek resting against the toilet paper roll. Her shirt was off and her heavily padded pink bra had been pushed up beneath her chin. Lipstick and drool were smeared across her face and she was snoring softly. Jane closed the bathroom door and slid home the lock.

"Amber," Lola said, poking her arm. "Amber wake up, it's time to go now."

Amber made a vague, cranky noise and swatted at Lola's hand as if it were a fly.

"She's trashed all right," Jane said, lifting a mascara-smudged eyelid and looking into Amber's rolled up eye.

"Let's do it," Lola replied. "Get her shirt and her purse."

Jane found Amber's Prada purse and slung it over her own shoulder, then located Amber's crumpled pink sweater and wrestled her into it while Lola pushed open the single window in the room and looked out into the yard below.

"Coast is clear," she said.

She and Jane each took one of Amber's arms, hauling the insensate cheerleader to her feet. She weighed next to nothing, but the dead weight was still awkward as they muscled her over to the window. Jane leaned Amber into Lola's arms and climbed out through the window, slipping down into the back yard.

Jane took a quick glance around the yard to make sure they were unobserved and then motioned for Lola to hand Amber down. Lola struggled to stick first one of Amber's tanned and perfect legs out the window and then the other. One of her expensive high-heeled shoes slipped off and hit Jane in the forehead. She cursed silently and grabbed Amber's sweaty thighs, pulling while Lola pushed. When the cheerleader's full unconscious weight hit Jane she tumbled backward across the grass with Amber sprawling on top of her. Lola was down in a heartbeat, grabbing Amber under the arms and motioning for Jane to get up and grab her feet. Jane found herself thinking of a hundred stories where the protagonists are obliged to dispose of a

body. The authors always made it seem so easy. Walking awkwardly backward as quickly as she could, Jane let Lola steer as they carried Amber down the path and through the back gate, out into the street and around to Lola's van.

Leaning Amber across the hood of the van, Lola fumbled for her keys and unlocked the sliding rear door.

"You can forget it, Joey," Amber mumbled inexplicably and then puked up a stream of thin, fiercely alcoholic vomit down over the bumper.

"Jesus," Lola said. "If she pukes in my car, I really am gonna kill her."

"Come on," Jane said, grabbing the lolling Amber off the hood.

Together they bundled her into the back seat, slammed the door and then jumped in the front. Lola stomped on the gas and they sped away laughing

When they got near Lola's house they drove with the lights off, turning off the engine and coasting soundlessly into the driveway. All the lights in the neighboring houses were out and there was no one on the sleepy suburban street for as far as they could see.

Moving quickly and silently, they carried Amber across the driveway and over to the garage door.

"You have no... fuckin' idea..." Amber muttered into Jane's shoulder while Lola unlocked the door. "You don't have a clue."

Jane flinched at the sound of her voice, flushed with paranoia and looking over her shoulder to be sure there was no one there. They hustled Amber into Lola's workshop and shut the door, bolting it securely behind them.

"Okay," Lola said as they draped Amber across her worktable. "You get her laid out flat and put the swimcap on her head and straws in her nostrils. I'll start mixing the alginate."

"In her nostrils? You're kidding right?" Jane looked doubtfully at the two jauntily striped straws. "You think she's gonna lay still for that?"

Lola smirked, dumping white powder into a plastic bucket and mixing in water with her hands. "Won't be the first time someone

stuck something in her while she was unconscious. Now hurry up before this stuff starts to set."

Jane laughed and picked up one of the straws. Holding Amber's head still, she stuck the straw up into the unconscious girl's nostril. No response. She added the second straw and covered Amber's mouth. Amber was breathing smoothly and evenly through the straws, face untroubled and out cold. Jane gathered Amber's sweat-damp blonde hair up in a knot on the top of her head and yanked the tight latex cap over the girl's head.

"Okay," Jane said.

"Okay," Lola repeated. "Here goes nothing."

She hoisted the bucket up onto the table and began to quickly slop the slick white paste all over Amber's face. The unconscious cheerleader lay cooperatively still as the entire front of her head was covered.

"Timer," Lola said.

"Fifteen minutes." Jane replied, setting the timer.

Lola rinsed her hands.

"I can't believe it's working." Jane said.

"We're not there yet," Lola warned. "She could freak out at any moment."

Time ticked excruciatingly slowly by and nothing happened. Jane held her hands under the straws to feel the warm flutter of Amber's breath. Lola tapped the rubbery white shell that had formed over Amber's face and checked the timer again. When the fifteen minutes finally passed, she peeled the life cast up, revealing a perfect reverse of Amber's sleeping face inside.

"It worked," Jane said.

"Hot damn," Lola replied. "We're in business."

"What now?"

Lola smiled. "Principle photography," she said.

Together they lifted Amber off the table and carried her to the set they had constructed earlier. A simple set up, just a single, metal folding chair against a blue, plastic tarp background. They sat Amber in the chair and Jane pulled the swimcap off her head and tied her

down with quick, sloppy knots while Lola set up her video camera on a tripod. She motioned Jane out of the frame and hit record.

Silently, the two girls slipped into their costumes, black fatigue pants, long-sleeved black shirts, black gloves, boots and black ski masks. When they were both dressed they entered the set from either side. Jane grabbed Amber by the hair and lifted her head while Lola slapped her face until she came to a groggy semiconsciousness.

"What the hell?" she muttered, struggling against the ropes. "Are you crazy?"

"We're making a movie," Lola said. "And you're the star."

"A movie?" Amber grinned. "I'm the star?"

"That's right." Lola pointed to the camera. "You're the star and we're the bad guys."

"You're the bad guys," Amber repeated like a parrot, deteriorating into giggles.

"Now listen," Lola said. "The heroine, that's you, has been kidnapped. Just struggle and scream and act really scared okay?"

"Okay," Amber said, and her head dropped back down on her chin.

"Christ, wake up, willya?" Lola pinched the underside of Amber's arm.

"AAAAow!" Amber squealed. "That hurt, you fucker."

"Much better," Lola said. "Ready, action."

Lola grabbed the camera off the tripod and shot some footage of Amber's bound and struggling body. Then she looked up at Jane and nodded.

Jane hefted a machete and poked the tip of the blade under Amber's chin. "How about I slice all the skin off your pretty face, bitch?" she asked.

Jane had to stifle a sudden urge to giggle. Never in a million years would she ever have dreamed of saying something like that to anyone, but it just sort of popped out. She was surprised by how good it felt.

"Oh my God," Amber said, blubbing fearfully. She actually wasn't a bad actress, even bombed. "Oh my God please don't hurt me. Please. Oh my God."

Lola zoomed in on Amber's crying face as a bubble of snot swelled in her nostril.

"Scream," Jane said, pressing the ridiculously huge knife harder against Amber's throat.

"Huh?"

"I said scream."

Lola walked over with the camera still in her hands and pinched Amber again even harder and she let out a perfect, horror-movie scream. "Beautiful," Lola said. "A couple more just like that and it's a wrap."

"You heard her," Jane said. "Scream again."

Amber let fly with a volley of sobbing screams, winding down into a coughing fit.

"Don't you puke again," Lola warned.

"Please," Amber begged, slushy drunken words sounding nicely beaten and terrified. "Please let me go. Please. I won't tell anybody about the abortion. It's like it never happened."

Jane and Lola exchanged quizzical looks and Amber dissolved into sobs and then passed out again.

A knock on the garage door nearly sent the two girls right out of their skins.

"Lola," the high-pitched, breathy voice of Lola's mother called. "Honey, keep it down in there will you? It's late."

Lola clapped her hand over her mouth to stifle giggles before she called out, "Sorry mom. We're just shooting another scene for the movie."

"Okay," Lola's mother said. "But wrap it up soon, all right? The neighbors are still mad about that zombie thing you did last month when you put the corn syrup all over their dog."

"Ten more minutes," Lola said, pulling a piece of duct tape off the roll and slapping it over Amber's mouth.

Lola shot some more footage of Amber struggling and crying with the tape on her mouth and then some nice close-ups of her bloodshot, mascara-streaked eyes.

"Cut," Lola said with a grin, switching off the camera. "And that's a motherfucking wrap!"

"Great," Jane said.

"Let me just get a couple of digital pictures," Lola said. "For continuity."

She snapped several shots of the bound girl, including close-ups of her ruined makeup.

"Got it," Lola said. "Let her loose."

Jane pulled the tape off Amber's mouth and began to untie her. "That was great, Amber," she said. "You're gonna be a big star."

"That's right," Amber said.

When Jane started to undress Amber, the cheerleader got wild and belligerent, swinging loose, ragdoll fists. "I'm not making a porno," she hollered. "You can't make me!"

"Shit," Jane said, fighting to hold Amber down and looking to Lola in frustration.

"We're not filming you now, Amber," Lola put the camera on the table pointing the other way and lifted both hands in the air. "See? We just need to get you into your next costume."

"Well, why didn't you say so?" Amber relaxed in Jane's arms. "Am I a pirate?"

Jane and Lola burst out laughing. "Yeah," Lola said, pulling off Amber's sweater and bra and slipping a Black Flag T-shirt over her head. "A punk rock pirate."

Jane gathered up Amber's clothing and jewelry in a plastic bag while Lola slid a pair of faded camouflage pants up over the cheerleader's hips and slipped her feet into plastic flip-flops that were a size and a half too small.

"Avast," Amber said, spraying Lola with alcoholic spit. "Prepare to be shwashbuckled."

"Yo ho ho and a bottle of rum," Lola replied, hauling the transformed Amber to her feet.

"It's funny," Jane said, smiling a little. "She looks almost human."

"Don't let the outfit fool you," Lola said. "She's still the most vicious bitch in school."

"I can't drink rum," Amber said. "It's totally fattening."

They each grabbed an arm and between them they hustled Amber back out to the van. Jane sat with her in the back seat while Lola

drove. Within minutes, Amber had deteriorated into sobs again.

"I'm hungry," she wailed. "I want a Snickers."

"We'll get you one later, okay?" Jane said.

"Nobody likes me," Amber said. "They say they like me because they want to be me... or stick it in me... but they don't really like me."

Jane reached out and patted Amber's shoulder, feeling a sudden wash of inexplicable pity for the drunken cheerleader.

"We like you," Jane said.

"Speak for yourself," Lola muttered.

"You do?" Amber threw her arms around Jane. "You're my only friend."

"Sure we're your friends," Lola said, winking at Jane in the rearview mirror. "That's why we're gonna help you now."

"You're gonna help me?"

"That's right," Lola said, pulling into the parking lot of the New Dawn Substance Abuse Clinic.

"Are you sure they'll take her like this?" Jane asked, trying not to watch while Amber doubled over and fertilized the roses by the clinic door.

"I called ahead," Lola said. "As long as we can get her to sign the paperwork, she's in." She called over to the vomiting Amber. "You want to stop drinking, don't you Amber?"

In response, Amber turned away and puked again.

"I'll take that as a yes."

They helped Amber through the doors and into the clinic's lobby. It was downscale and rough, not at all the kind of cushy, plush day-spa Amber's rich parents would have chosen to dry out their daughter. Peeling yellow paint, scuffed brown linoleum, brown plastic connected chairs that looked donated after ten years at the airport. There was a long, high counter with sliding bulletproof glass. Behind the glass was a very tough-looking black woman with close-cropped hair and a New Dawn T-shirt.

"Can I help you?" she asked, arching an eyebrow.

"Our friend is an alcoholic," Lola said. "She wants to stop drinking."

"Is that right?" The woman looked down at Amber and the drunken girl started crying again.

"I hate my life," she sobbed. "I don't want to be like this anymore."

"Well I'll need her insurance card," the woman said. "Some ID. And she'll need to sign this release."

She handed Lola a clipboard and Jane sat Amber down, going through her purse to find her driver's license and insurance card.

Sign here, Amber," Lola said, putting the cheap, chewed pen in Amber's hand.

Amber scrawled a wild, loopy scribble about a half an inch above the signature line and Lola handed the clipboard back to the woman behind the counter.

"So how long will it be before she can make phone calls?" Lola asked.

"She'll be in detox for two weeks," the woman replied. "There can be no contact with the outside world during that time."

Jane and Lola exchanged a look, each biting their lip not to laugh.

The woman pushed a button under the desk and a huge bearded guy in orderly's scrubs came out into the waiting room.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked Amber in a surprisingly gentle voice. Amber turned back to Jane and Lola with a panicked look on her face.

"It's okay, Amber," Jane said. "You'll be fine."

Amber flung her arms around Jane. "I love you," she said. "You're my only friend."

"Okay, that's enough now, Amber," the guy said, unwrapping Amber's arms from around Jane's neck. "It's time to go. You'll be able to see your friends again when you are out of detox, okay?"

"Okay," Amber said meekly, like a child. She looked so tiny and helpless as that giant led her away and again, Jane felt a stab of sympathy. Lola mock-punched her in the arm.

"Let's go, Mother Teresa," Lola said.

Jane nodded and let Lola lead her away.

FOUR

"Rise and shine," Lola said, unscrewing the lid on a thermos full of strong coffee and waving it under Jane's nose.

Jane and Lola had both endured three hours of ragged, restless sleep on the battered sofa in Lola's workshop. Once again, Jane had been troubled by murky, confusing dreams, underscored by that irritating, childish song. She was bleary-eyed and cranky, recoiling from both the sunlight streaming in through the open door and from Lola's cheerful demeanor. Lola, in contrast, was in high gear, chomping at the bit and ready to go.

"What time is it?" Jane asked, rubbing crust from her eyes.

"Nine am," Lola said.

"You are Satan," Jane said, rolling over and throwing an arm over her eyes.

"Come on," Lola said, pouring a mug full of sweet, milky coffee and handing it to Jane. "Satan would not have brought you coffee." She rattled a white paper bag. "Or sticky buns."

Jane peeked out from under her forearm. "Sticky buns?"

"Of course," Lola smiled and filled a mug for Jane. "Caffeine and sugar, breakfast of champions."

Jane sipped the coffee quietly, wishing for some good, strong Earl Grey tea instead, but still needing the caffeine.

"I can't believe we did it," Jane said. "It doesn't seem real."

"Well, so far, so good," Lola said. "But we've got our work cut out for us today if we're gonna get the video cut and delivered by tomorrow morning."

"Right," Jane said, feeling the buzz of the caffeine starting to chase away the cobwebs. "Let's get to it."

Under Lola's strict direction, Jane went to work mixing compounds and holding hair dryers, hauling buckets of water and painting fake nails on rubber hands and feet to match Amber's perfect French manicure. Raucous punk rock music blared in the background while they worked, driving them on like auditory caffeine.

While Amber's head was setting in the mold, they shot some other close-up footage to splice in. The machete cutting into a fake arm wearing Amber's watch and bracelets. A gloved hand removing Amber's shoe from a fake foot and then smashing the toes with a hammer. A hand pulling up the pink sweater and putting out a cigarette on a fake breast.

"I think the breasts are a little too big," Jane said, waving away the stink of burning silicone and snugging the sweater back up over the artificial torso's full breasts.

Lola scowled behind the camera. "How was I supposed to know she always wears a padded bra?" She shook her head. "If we had more time I would have cast her whole body. As it is, we'll just have to make do with what we have." Lola winked. "Don't worry. We'll fix it in post."

They laughed and poured another round of coffee.

When the fake Amber head was ready, Lola quickly gave it an airbrush coat of paint approximating Amber's tanning-booth skin tone and then stuck it on a metal post for hair and makeup.

She pinned up the printed photo of Amber's tear-streaked face on the wall beside her and hummed "Beauty School Drop Out" while fluffing up the blond wig and gluing on fake eyelashes.

Jane looked over Lola's shoulder, fascinated as Lola dipped her brush into a cup of water and dribbled it through the eyeliner, causing it to run in sooty streaks down the cheeks.

"Perfect."

Jane phoned for take-out while Lola set up the money shot, the scene where they slice into Amber's cheeks with the machete.

"Time is of the essence here," Lola said. "We won't be able to get another take. It's gotta be perfect the first time."

Jane held the machete while Lola taped thin plastic tubing to the inside of her wrist. Testing, Jane cut into one of the fake arms and thick, dark blood filled the slice perfectly.

Lola fiddled with the lights and then carefully placed Amber's head on a microphone stand in the center of the little set and put a piece of over the mouth.

"Looks like Amber's ready for her close-up," Lola said, peering at the duct tape view screen. "Ready Jane?"

"I don't know," Jane said doubtfully. "She looks too relaxed."

Lola looked over the top of the screen at the head, frowning.

"It's the eyes, I think," Jane said. "She doesn't look scared with her eyes closed like that. They're not scrunched-up-scared closed, they're just out-cold closed."

"Well cover them," Lola said. "Stand behind her and cover her eyes with one hand."

Jane did as she was told, covering the fake Amber's eyes with her gloved hand as if playing peek-a-boo.

"Great," Lola said. "Much better. Too bad we don't have footage of you covering the real Amber's eyes, but y'know, if I add in one of her muffled screams when you start cutting, I think it's gonna fly."

Jane shifted her grip on the machete and leaned forward. "Ready when you are, Mr DeMille," she said.

"Ok, rolling..." Lola lifted one finger and brought it down to point at Jane. "Action."

Jane sliced deeply into the silicone of the left cheek, squeezing the bulb in her hand so that the fake blood flowed into the cut and down the curve of the face. She reached across and slashed the other cheek, carving a matching gash. Her heart was pounding with nervous energy and she found herself wondering how the real Amber was doing at that moment. If she was sick with DTs and was somehow able to feel what they were doing to her double like some kind of postmodern voodoo. Jane had to remind herself of the look on Amber's face when she called her a corpse fucker.

"And cut," Lola said. "Fuckin'-A. That was brutal."

Jane let out a little nervous laugh and tried to put down the machete, but the tube taped to her wrist kept her attached to the big knife like an umbilical cord.

"Here, let me get that," Lola said, putting down the camera coming to Jane's aid. "Great job"

Jane let Lola remove the tape and tubing, and then went to pour herself more coffee. "What's left?" she asked over the top of her full mug.

"The demands," Lola said, skinning unselfconsciously out of her spattered work T-shirt and slipping into the black shirt from the night before. She seemed to have no shyness whatsoever about her scrappy boyish body. "You know, the 'do what we say or else' part."

The delivery guy arrived then with steaming paper boxes of Thai food and they took a quick break to wolf down spicy mint pork and thick rice noodles in black soy sauce. More coffee and Lola wiped her mouth and pulled the ski mask over her head.

"No rest for the wicked," she said, grinning beneath the oval opening in the black wool.

She set the camera up on the tripod and instructed Jane to stand by as she walked into the center of the little set.

"What have you got?" Lola asked.

Jane looked into the view-screen and indicated the top and bottom of the frame on her own body with one hand about six inches above her head and one just below her breasts.

"Tighten up a bit," Lola told her. "Less air above the head and no tits, okay?"

"Like this?" Jane asked, pressing down a rocker switch that said zoom. The camera zoomed too quickly, the screen filling up with Lola's masked face. It was really creepy, seeing her new friend reduced to this tiny flat image of a sexless stranger. She backed out a bit until she had a frame that ended just above Lola's head and just below the neck.

"Rolling?" Lola asked.

"Rolling," Jane repeated, hitting the record button.

"Okay, this is action," Lola said. She paused, looking fiercely into the camera. "We have Amber Dunn," she said. "Her life is in your hands. If you fail to comply with our demands, notify the authorities or Amber's parents, or deviate in any way from our explicit written instructions, she will die and you will be next. We know where you live. We will find you. There are no second chances."

Another long pause and then Lola raised her hand.

"Cut," she said. "That's a wrap." Lola bounded forward and pulled Jane into an embrace.

"We did it," Jane said, smiling wide

"Well, we shot it," Lola replied. "Now it's editsville for me. You can catch some sleep if you like. I'll be pulling an all-nighter, but I'll wake you when I have a solid final."

"Okay," Jane said, curling up on the sofa and pulling a Caitlin R Keirnan novel from her knapsack. She read for a while, but the sounds of Amber's screams over and over were distracting and her eyes felt hot and scratchy. Eventually, she dozed, the book tented on her belly.

In her dream she was floating in cool dark water. In front of her, like a reverse aquarium, was a glass box and inside the box was a messy living room. A blonde woman with bad tattoos and track marks on her scrawny arms snored softly on a tacky sofa. The TV seemed far too bright, washing out everything in the room and making hulking monster shadows across the grungy carpet. Jane had the bizarre notion that she was looking at some kind of recreation, a museum diorama, rather than a real room, but it seemed inexplicably critical to memorize every detail. She saw there were other boxes, some room-sized like the first, others small and tethered to the bottom of the sea with rusted chains. Inside a smaller box, she saw a little dog skull, still covered in sticky brown shreds of flesh. Its neighbors held inexplicable items like a broken vodka bottle, a coiled leather belt with no buckle, and a lock of blonde hair tied with a pink ribbon. A hypodermic needle. A glove with strange long knives on the tips of each finger.

Jane's bodiless dream self drifted past a second room-sized box and inside she saw a dim industrial space filled with rusted machines. There was someone there inside that box, someone terrifying, but Jane couldn't see well enough to know who. It seemed there were thick oily shadows that moved like living things between the twisting pipes and rusted catwalks, deliberately hiding that person from her sight. She shuddered and pressed ahead through the water. Out of the dark ocean loomed a third glass box, this one almost totally obscured by algae and barnacles. With unconscious dream awareness, Jane understood that this box contained the future, and she was both morbidly fascinated and terrified to see what was inside. Her insubstantial fingers reached out to wipe the

algae away and the glass shattered violently, blood pouring between the cracks and filling the water around her. She flailed away, blood all around her, engulfing her and she wanted to scream but it was in her mouth, drowning her.

"Jane?"

Jane sat up with a start. She was back on the sofa in Lola's workshop. Lola was standing over her with a mug of coffee. She looked pale and exhausted, bruised blue shadows under her eyes. Jane took the coffee.

"What time is it?" Jane asked.

"A bit past one in the morning," Lola replied. "Ready for a test screening?"

Jane swallowed a hot gulp of coffee and nodded.

Lola ushered her over to the desk and sat her in the slightly warm padded chair. Lola pulled up a plaster-spattered stool behind her and reached around to click the mouse on her computer. A grainy black and white image resolved on a small television monitor on the shelf above. Lola's masked face.

"We have Amber Dunn," she said, but her voice had been electronically deepened to a low, sexless growl.

The image cut to Amber in the chair, bound and sobbing. The jittery, handheld camera really added to the discomfort of watching it. It had this awful, third-generation snuff kind of look that was totally believable. A quick, breathless series of cuts back and forth between the various kinds of torture and the real Amber's tormented face. Lola had enhanced the torture scenes by dubbing in Amber's screams over the close-ups. The smashing of the toes was particularly grueling and hideous. Then Lola's gloved hand slapping duct tape on the live Amber's mouth, swiftly followed by Jane covering the fake Amber's eyes and slashing her cheeks. A chilling, muffled howl on the audio track and then fade to black. Back to the close-up on the masked Lola again, stating their demands. Then static.

"Holy shit," Jane said softly.

"My best work yet," Lola smirked, curling her raised fists like GS. "Geek girls are go."

"Geek girls are go," Jane repeated, touching her fists to Lola's.

"So now, we print up the individual demands, then dub and deliver for tomorrow morning," Lola said. "And after that, I need a nap. For like, a year."

FIVE

After Jane finally staggered home on Sunday night, she found herself reflecting on how quickly she had become so close with Lola. It was really an odd match. Her musical tastes were totally different and Lola's taste in films was completely anathema to Jane's sensibilities. Lola rarely read, but books were everything to Jane; reading was her first love and lifelong passion. While Jane was girly and refined, Lola was boyish and rebellious. Jane cared a great deal about getting good grades and picking the right school. She wanted to get her doctorate in English Lit and lock herself away in the Ivory Tower like some raven-haired, intellectual Rapunzel. Lola thought grades were used by adults to punish creativity and free-thinking, and could think of little else but running off to Hollywood to make monster movies.

Under different circumstances, Jane would have disliked someone like Lola and would have secretly catalogued her amongst the mundane masses she encountered in every school she ever attended. However, Lola was from the beginning wholly unclassifiable and the successful counterpoint of their relationship proved that they didn't need to analyze what made it work. It just worked. Like war buddies, strangers thrown together by circumstance who endure pain and fear and share hard-won victories, emerging on the other side as the closest of friends.

Jane was itching with anticipation the next morning when she woke before her alarm and started getting ready for school. She was deathly curious and also more than a little afraid of how Amber's friends were going to react to the video. They weren't the brightest girls but they certainly had a lot of influence with other kids. If they found out who had made the video and what really happened to Amber, Jane and Lola could be in an incredible amount of trouble. Their lives would be hellish and they could blame no one but themselves. The only worse course of action would have been to tell the school officials about the bullying. Maybe Lola the Rebel was used to making trouble, but Jane was not. As much as she enjoyed

the adventure of it all, she still felt antsy and anxious and that anxiety was increasing exponentially every minute.

What if it backfired? Jane envisioned this mushroom cloud of doom widening over her life if the video got in the wrong hands and the authorities thought maybe something really had happened to Amber. Even when it was revealed that she was fine and in rehab, couldn't they still get into trouble for making a film of Amber without her sober consent?

Jane checked her email. There was an anonymous response to one of her Live Journal posts. The subject line read "Corpse Fucker." In the body of the post was a link to a Tripod server, one of those free services that offered online space in exchange for letting them clutter your website with ads. The link was to a jpeg picture. Jane hesitated. Should she open it? She had no choice. She remembered when Shayne took her picture that first day in homeroom. This had to be her doing, but it could have been anyone. Resolute that she wouldn't let it upset her, she clicked the link.

A crude Photoshop job. Someone had put her head on the body of a pig being screwed from behind by a cartoon skeleton. Jane hugged her self, then quickly placed her hands on the keyboard again, ashamed of the feeling of her curves. Bastards. A caption read, "I fuck dead people. A slick finger of panic wormed down her throat, choking her as she wondered how widely distributed this image had become.

"Jane."

"Coming," she called as she hurriedly deleted the email and the attachment with it. Next time, she wouldn't open such things. It was exactly what they wanted, to terrorize her. Well, they wanted terrorism, that was exactly what they would get. She pictured Shayne opening her copy of the tape, along with her own special instructions. Would she obey? Nothing to do but wait and see.

Jane distrusted the tone of her mother's voice, but maybe she was just being paranoid. She knew she would be on edge until she could find out the results of the Great Cheerleader Abduction That Wasn't. She played every angle over and over in her mind, wondering if she

was going to be able to handle this and keep her tumultuous emotions from showing on the surface.

While she was still obsessing over what her life might become in this mad new Amberless world, her mother had gotten tired of waiting and rapped twice on the door before cracking it open. "Jane?"

"Mom." She was so startled that she grabbed a handful of dresses to steady herself.

"What's with you this morning? I just want to talk to you." She eased open the door.

Jane tried on a smile, but inside she wanted to pull down the coffin lid and die. These talks were never good.

"I'm fine. What's up?"

Her mother was actually wearing a dress, something that was thinner than her usual clothes and had a little bounce. Of course, she wore one of her drab blazers over it, but it was still rather nice. Jane guessed it was the California heat that drove her to wear lighter, more breathable fabrics. It certainly looked much better on her. Even her expression was not as dour as Jane had expected.

"Jane, I wanted to tell you something. Sit down."

Jane sat on the chair by her computer, fear running relays with reality in her mind. Her mother crossed her arms, smiling. "DevTech wants to hire me permanently."

"Really?" Jane said, more relieved than pleased, but her mother didn't seem to notice.

"Really," her mother said. "We might-might-be able to stick around here this time. Isn't that great?"

Jane nodded and tried on a smile, although inwardly she felt it was too little, too late. Jane was eighteen now. It was her senior year already. What a time to finally settle down, just before Jane would leave for college.

"Great," she answered anyway, keeping the bitter irony to herself.

"I just wanted to find out how you felt about it before I said yes."

"Of course, yes," she said. "Say yes, Mom." She threw her arms around her mother. She knew it was what her mother wanted. And for all her picking on her mother, Jane wanted her to be happy. She

had a life too, and deserved a chance to settle in and put down some new roots. She'd watched her mother go through so much misery, worry and loneliness since her father's death, she just wanted her to feel good for once.

"All right, I will," she said, hugging back tightly. "I would have asked you sooner, but you were at your friend's house all weekend. I'm so glad you're starting to meet people and make friends, kiddo."

"Oh, Lola's okay," Jane said, "for a Californian."

"That's more like the misanthropic daughter I know and love," Jane's mother replied, grinning. She gently swept a stray ebony strand from Jane's forehead. "I was beginning to think you might have been taken over by aliens."

"We don't have much in common," Jane said. "Well, except for being geeks, I suppose."

"What's wrong with being a geek? I'm a geek. Your father was a geek. In fact you come from a long and illustrious line of geeks. Be proud of your geek pedigree."

"I am," she said, thinking of their plan to achieve revenge against the enemies of geekdom. "I really am."

"Anyway, in case you decide you do want to be more social with your geeky new friends, I thought I'd splurge and get you a little something." She reached into her right blazer pocket and removed a compact cell phone. "It's got everything: a camera, browser, all that. Just don't go over six hundred minutes a month before six at night, okay? After that, it's free."

She handed Jane the phone. Jane flipped it open and gingerly examined the little metallic keys, the mute gray screen, the sleek volume buttons along the side. Her mother gave her the box and instruction manual, as well as the phone number. She showed her how to turn it on and how to dial out. They spent several goofy minutes trying to make silly, memorable words out of her new number.

"How about 555-GLEE?" her mother suggested.

"Too cheerful," Jane replied. "How about 555-IKEE?"

"Icky?" Her mother laughed. "That's more like my daughter."

They saved Lola's home and cell phone number, as well as her mother's work and Nextel number, in the address book. They even created voice prompts so that she wouldn't have to dial at all if she didn't want to.

Rushing out the door with her red nylon backpack, Jane felt armed. The black clouds of anxiety around her dried up and dispersed as she thought about all the ways she could use her new phone. Now that she was technologically on par with everyone else at school, if not superior in some ways, she felt far better equipped to deal with whatever might happen.

But as soon as she saw the ugly school building with its hunchback gymnasium, her confidence blistered and peeled with astonishing speed. The phone seemed pitifully small and inadequate in her backpack pocket. She felt suddenly sure that she was riding a train right into a wall and that this lunatic plot for revenge was going to be her undoing.

There was no sign of Lola before first period, but that didn't mean anything. Lola came and went as she saw fit, ditching class and showing up defiantly late. She would arrive in her own time and not a minute before. Alone, Jane headed to French class with a leaden fear coiled through the maze of her intestines. Ashley and Kayla would be there. Amber would not. The results of their labors would finally be known. She decided to slide into class and ignore the enemy no matter what. If she didn't play innocent, the gig was up. Bracing herself for whatever confrontation might or might not occur, Jane took several deep breaths and rode into the room with the steady stream of students. As she sat, she saw no trace of the cheerleaders. She overheard one of the jocks ask a friend if there was some kind of special cheerleading practice.

"Sure there was," the guy replied. "At my place last night. We had a *ménage à four* and I wore those bitches out."

"Yeah, sure," the first jock replied. "Then you woke up and your jammies were all sticky."

Witless snickering filled the room and the speculation continued.

Jane's ears widened into government-issue, extraterrestrial-detecting satellite dishes that picked up every comment in the room.

Now that she had the power to call Lola, she was dying to dial her, even though it was prohibited. Text messaging would be better, but even if she knew how she couldn't do that, either. Of course, Lola wouldn't be expecting the call. She might not even have her phone turned on. Jane would just have to wait until she got out of class, and that seemed like absolutely forever.

As Madame Koenig began to speak—"Écoutez!"—Jane lost herself in the gentle patter of the teacher's voice as she spoke in French about hotels, luggage, and how to reserve a room. Just as Jane's satellite system was shutting down and she began to focus on the work at hand, the whispers and gasps of her classmates drew her attention to the door.

Kayla stood trembling in the doorway. Her entire head had been shorn of her sleek and pampered locks, as per her personalized written instructions. No hat, headscarf or covering of any kind would be permitted or else Amber was history and she'd be next. At first, Jane had been skeptical about the power that a simple haircut would have to hurt the cheerleader. Of course, Jane liked her own long black hair very much, but it would not be the end of the world if she had to cut it off. She could finish her wreath right away and probably have enough left over for a choker or a brooch. Jane's hair grew like a weed anyway and would be back before she knew it. But Lola had been insistent. She explained how, since freshman year, she had seen Kayla line up jar after jar of special "hair food" vitamins and capsules of unflavored gelatin at lunch time. How she meticulously conditioned and coddled her hair several times daily in the school bathrooms. She apparently spent hundreds of dollars on top of the line hair products and went three times a week to an upscale salon for straightening and deep conditioning. Her hair was not very long, only just below shoulder length, but it was clearly a point of intense personal angst for Kayla.

So now there she was, shorn and shaking like a spring lamb and Jane could see that Lola had been right. Kayla hadn't done a very good job of shaving her head either. Her dark scalp bristled with incomplete sweeps from a razor that was less than perfectly sharp. She was wearing a trendy pink skirt and a tight black blouse,

clutching her leather backpack like a life preserver on the high seas. Eyes puffy, lips pouting. But her head was by far the oddest thing Jane had ever seen. The surface was lumpy in places that Jane knew should be lumpy from a purely anatomical standpoint, but still it looked very, very wrong. Talk about extraterrestrials; Kayla's enormous eyes and jutting chin made her look exactly like a gray alien. In fact, she looked like she'd been abducted and returned by the grays as a rejected potential family member, an experiment in adaptability to alien life that went horribly awry.

The terrified girl timidly entered the classroom as every student gaped and gasped. She shrugged, pulling her shoulders tightly to her ears as if that would cover her glistening, bald head. She was as bald as any of the guys in class. As she slid into the aisle between the desks to take her seat behind Jane, Kayla dropped her gaze to the floor in deep shame. She completely avoided Jane's eyes, which made Jane's heart hop wildly.

Success! Success!

Jane wanted to howl with glee. She wanted to jump up on her chair and belt out a Broadway tune. She wanted to cackle like a crazed drug fiend. She wanted to rub her hands together and twirl her mustache. She wanted to crack a bullwhip and usher Kayla into her circus cage, holding her at bay with a wooden chair and pistol.

Of course, she hadn't seen the other two girls yet. Jane had a feeling that it was not so clean a victory. Although the most vulnerable, Kayla was by far not the dumbest of the bully gang. Stupidity could sway the course of events in all sorts of incalculable ways, and there was plenty of it still out there.

Still, it kicked ass to see Kayla cowed.

Madame Koenig made light of the cheerleader's new look. She turned the discussion to hair color and styles, reviewing the vocabulary for every color and length of hair. One of the jocks asked Kayla if she'd lost a bedroom hair vs hair match against one of the Varsity wrestlers. The class laughed. Jane could feel Kayla behind her, imploding with embarrassment. Because she couldn't help it, Jane took a long strand of her own hair and started twirling it luxuriously. When she finished, she put the strand in her mouth for a

few moments as she took notes and then swished her hair off her shoulder and over the top of her head, exposing her ear and changing the part to the side. She had no idea she had this evil streak in her. She was enjoying it immensely, especially knowing that Kayla got the full view of Jane's hair falling gracefully back into place. She wished she could take out her brush, but that would be too obvious. She wanted Kayla to suffer but didn't want to be accused of being the perpetrator of Kayla's troubles.

When French class ended, Kayla bolted out of the room. She stumbled pathetically as she fought past the surge of students to reach the hallway first. A string of whistles and jokes followed her. Nearly everyone in unison yanked their cell phones from either bags or pockets, and began dialing. The grapevine was now on fire. Jane calmly stood and readied herself to leave, but she was absolutely dying to call Lola. Of course, she would probably get the news before Jane could even dial.

It didn't matter. She ran into Lola in the third floor hallway as she headed over to history class.

"Is it true?" Lola asked. "Did you see it?"

"With my own eyes," Jane responded. "You were right. You'd think she was forced to cut off her thumbs, or her breasts." Jane leaned forward, grinning. "I played with my hair in front of her through the entire period."

"You wicked bitch!" Lola shrieked happily. She held up two fist-like Gs and Jane did the same and they touched knuckles.

"It was genius. I couldn't have dreamed of a better retribution."

"Have you seen Ashley or Shayne?"

Jane shook her head. "I gotta go." She reached in her bag and pulled out her cell, flashing it at Lola. "I'll have my people call your people and we'll do lunch."

"Holy shit. Where'd you get that?"

"My mom," Jane replied.

"That's hella cool. Okay, call me."

"All right, I will. See you later."

"Later."

The two girls spun off on their different trajectories, Jane once again buoyed up on her victory over Kayla.

History was relatively quiet. The bore of a history teacher droned on about the French Revolution and how it led to the beheading of King Louis XVI and his wife, Marie Antoinette. He was trying to build up a parallel with the American Revolution, to show how our example of rebellion and independence affected the rest of the world. As the teacher described the rise of Maximilien Robespierre—Robespierre the Incorruptible—as he terrorized eighteenth century France, snicking off the heads of the French aristocracy. Jane secretly cheered for Robespierre and his Republic. She built her own mental guillotine and walked each bully up to his or her execution. Take that, Marie Antoinette. It was only a fantasy, but it satisfied her. Hell, seeing them cowed and humiliated was more than enough. But what of the other two girls? Jane envisioned them locked in the Bastille that once held peasants but now imprisoned only those of the monarchy. They begged ceaselessly for release before their execution as they watched their fellow aristocrats fall one by one under the blade of the Republic. "Je suis très désolé," they would cry. "I am so sorry." That was all she needed: to see them suffer, one way or the other, was her *raison d'être*, her reason for being. To end the long reign of the monarchy of The Popular would give her soul peace it would never know, even if she got into the best college in the world. It would assure her that the rest of the world did not necessarily behave this way and, if it did, she could triumph over it. Her years of feeling trapped and powerless would be over.

"The problem was," her history teacher droned, "that Robespierre became too popular, too powerful. He had been a member of the Cult of Reason, and before long, he was demanding that the state officially recognize that there was a God. He even began to attack not just the conservatives, but the moderates, as well. No one was safe. Everyone was suspect unless they held views as extreme as Robespierre's. Liberté, Egalité, and Fraternité soon deteriorated into The Reign of Terror. We have to remember Gresham's law of political morality: while the bad spurs the good to action, the good in

turn become corrupt in the tireless and inevitable quest for power. A bloodbath rarely returns anything but a bloodbath."

Jane floated out of class and into homeroom where she sat and studied the phone's many functions. That was the best thing about having a technical geek mom. She never settled for anything but the best gadgetry. Shayne was there in homeroom already but she was silent and clenched with torment and anxiety. Her personal humiliation would not begin until lunchtime. She tried to pay attention to her friends as they chattered excitedly about the missing Amber and the deformed Kayla. The redhead nervously petted her own hair as they pitched each other devastated looks over the surprising demise of Kayla's coiffure. Their talk was immediately backstabbing and vicious. Kayla was now prime material for every cruel sort of gossip imaginable but Jane could see that Shayne was not participating, knowing she would be next in line for target practice. The anticipation was delicious. The homeroom teacher began to call roll.

"Amber Dunn?"

Jane suppressed a giggle. Amber Dunn was answering roll call in rehab. *Tee hee!* The sheer joy of triumph flooded her once more.

The day edged on into the afternoon. Just after the lunch bell, she called Lola. There were two lunch periods and Jane's was second. So was Shayne's.

"LCFX," Lola said when she answered.

"Hey," Jane said.

"Oh hey," Lola replied. "Any news?"

"Nope. I'm kinda worried, actually."

"Why?"

"No sign of Ashley yet," Jane said. "What do you think has happened?"

"I dunno. Shit, anything really. Just be cool. Just—" Lola broke off and an uproar showered the cell phone reception with static. "Holy shit," she said, over and over. "Holy fuckin' SHIT!"

"Lola! What's going on? Where are you?"

"Run to the cafeteria, quick."

Jane kept the phone planted to her ear as she sped down the hallway toward the stairwell. "What? What? Tell me."

"You have got to see this." Lola teased. "What's taking you so long?"

"Okay, I'm hanging up." Jane shut the phone and fled down the stairs. As she made her way to the courtyard, her eyes scanned the clumps and cliques for any sign of trouble. The crowd only thickened once she reached the cafeteria. She noticed Kayla, surrounded by other girls, tearfully resisting their verbal probes. She only shook her head and bit her lip as they nattered, hugging herself as she leaned against the cement wall. Ah, sweet torment.

Jane paused at the windows all along the cafeteria's south wall and leaned against them, cupping her hand on the rim glass to focus past her own reflection. Inside, there was some sort of commotion. Several of the jocks had gathered around one of the cafeteria tables, eating and laughing in their letterman jackets. Each jacket had "HH" stitched in red on the back under a devil's face. "Hemingway Hell" as Jane often thought of it, although for the jocks it was more like heaven—as good as their lives were ever going to get.

It was the far table that drew their derision and fascination. Shayne's bony ass was sitting on the tabletop as she balanced a five-pound box of See's Candy on her knees. About half the box was gone, the little, dark brown tissue cups scattered on the cafeteria floor. As she lifted another high-calorie morsel and reluctantly placed it in her mouth, she looked as if she would die, face green with nauseous horror. The girls around her were begging to know what she was up to and Jane could only imagine how the skinny cheerleader must feel, overstuffed and greasy with fat and sugar as she continued to eat more and more. Lola had explained to Jane that Shayne was anorexic, not bulimic, and that this kind of binge eating would be totally alien to her starvation-trained system. Shayne's instructions had specifically stated that if she vomited, even involuntarily, that Amber would die and she would be next. Jane could see her fighting to keep the chocolate down. Her shrunken stomach was probably the size of a teabag and Jane pictured it stretching desperately to accommodate this sudden flood of unexpected input. She would be

of the treadmill for the rest of the semester trying to work those calories off but she would never be able to escape the taunts and humiliation, Jane slipped into the cafeteria and fished out her new cell phone.

"Shayne," she called, walking boldly toward the redhead. "Hey Shayne."

The miserable cheerleader turned her face toward Jane.

"Say cheese," Jane said, and snapped her photo.

When the photo came on the little screen it was brilliant. Shayne's mouth was smeared with chocolate, the nearly empty box of candy balanced on her bony knees. Her eyes were wide, like a deer in the headlights of an onrushing truck.

Shayne did not respond at all to having her photo taken. She simply looked down at the box and continued to robotically stuff the little candies into her mouth.

Jane could not believe her sudden courage. Never in a million years would she have had the guts to walk right up to her tormentor like that. She sat down at a nearby table, legs suddenly weak. She nearly jumped out of her skin when Lola smashed into her from the side, plopping down beside her and hugging her fiercely.

"You did not just take Shayne's photo, did you?" Lola asked grinning hugely.

Jane nodded, showing Lola the picture. "Fucking brilliant!" Lola howled. "You are too much."

Jane smiled. It was amazing to her how she had gone from the quivering, fearful bully-magnet of her first day, to the ballsy criminal mastermind she felt like now.

"Heads up," Lola said. "Get ready for another portrait."

Another girl in glasses and an ill-fitting white T-shirt waded through the onlookers. Her body language was anxious and timid as she slunk over to Shayne's table and sat. Her glasses slipping, she quickly adjusted them on her face.

That was when Jane recognized her. It was Ashley. Her T-shirt bore block black lettering and a photograph. Sure enough, Ashley had done exactly as she had been instructed. She probably took the morning off from school to have the shirt made up at the mall or

something, which would explain her absence from her morning classes. The shirt bore a blown-up picture of a girl with a hawk nose wearing thick glasses like the ones she wore now. Her dingy brown hair framed her face in long, straight shanks. Her breasts were nonexistent, which was particularly funny because the picture was stretched over manmade bulges sculpted from silicone. In the picture, her lacy blouse hung flat and uninterrupted over her utterly uninspiring chest. An underdeveloped, curveless wonder. In contrast, she now looked like some very busy plastic surgeon's Lolita-Pygmalion.

Best of all, above the picture in bold black letters were printed the words: THE REAL ME.

The heat of victory now crashed over Jane. *Vive la Révolution! Vive la République!* All hail Robespierre the Incorruptible! The guillotine severed them not from their heads, but rather from their social groups and reputations. Jane could imagine the peasants surrounding her, cheering as the heads rolled one by one from block to basket.

There was still one Joker in the deck: Amber herself. She wouldn't be locked up forever. Eventually she would leave the rehab center and return to school, assuming that her parents allowed her to do so. She had to. She had to graduate. They all did, one way or another. But if she did come back, she could easily mount a counterattack on Jane and Lola, using her sway with the hoards of football team members to start bullying in a way that might go way beyond name-calling and a bit of shoving in doorways.

As she ate her lunch beside her friend, she wondered if maybe Lola didn't have such a bad idea, going to Hollywood. Maybe she could apply to UCLA or USC instead of Stanford or Yale. Wherever she landed, Jane was certain that nothing could ruin their friendship. Cemented in such victories, how could they not be the best of friends for life?

That night, Jane had another curious nightmare. She was in the mazelike halls of the school, running from class to class, only to find all the other students lying stiff on the floor with big cartoon Xs in their eyes. She was searching frantically for Lola when she heard the lilting strains of that simple counting song, sung in wavering high-pitched children's voices.

"One, two, Freddy's coming for you..."

She turned the corner and saw a trio of little blonde girls in perfect, starched white dresses, white socks, and clean white shoes. They were skipping rope at the far end of the hallway, two girls turning the rope while the third jumped, stomping her chubby legs on the scuffed linoleum.

"Three, four, better lock your door..."

She walked quietly down the hall toward the girls. They were so intent on their game that they didn't seem to see her.

"Five, six, grab your crucifix..."

She was less than six feet away from the girls when she noticed a small crimson stain on the front of the jumping girl's party dress. It grew larger and larger, dripping onto her white shoes and splashing as she jumped.

"Seven, eight, gonna stay up late..."

The two other girls were bleeding now too, white petticoats drenched with gore, faces splattered red and blonde curls soaked and matted.

"Nine, ten—"

They froze; the song cut short and the rope falling slack at their feet, turning bright, expectant little eyes toward Jane. She backed away as the spreading puddle encroached on her feet, inexplicably shod in childish white shoes just like the shoes on the feet of the bloody little girls. When she looked down at her body, she saw that she was dressed in a frilly white dress identical to theirs. She turned and ran.

Her confusion on the first day of school was nothing compared to the feeling of helpless disorientation that enfolded her as she ran and ran, deceitful hallways twisting like mad, funhouse tunnels, and there was someone following her. Someone terrible. Whoever it was,

they always seemed to remain a turn or two behind, casting long flickering shadows on the shiny linoleum. With slow, nightmare inevitability she rounded a corner into a dead end: three locked classroom doors and a clutter of stiff, X-eyed students sprawled across the floor. The lanky shadow slithered around the corner and she realized that the shadow was all that was there. Whoever or whatever was casting the shadow was somehow trapped outside her dream, pressing hungrily against its boundaries but somehow unable to penetrate the shell of her mind. The shadow reached for her with unnaturally long, blade—thin fingers and almost touched the hem of her frilly white dress when Jane sat up with a hot gasp clenched in her throat, safe and alone in her cozy bed.

SIX

In the days that followed, Jane and Lola watched with no small satisfaction as the defrocked cheerleaders were picked apart and ceaselessly tormented by their former friends, but the closer it got to the two week mark, the deeper the anxiety that plagued Jane became. She could not even conceive of what might happen when Amber was freed from rehab and the cheerleaders found out about the scam.

The morning of the second Monday after their initial victory, Jane woke early again, racked with nervous anticipation. She and Lola had spent the night before running possible scenarios and trying to plan for every contingency, but in the end they both had to admit that there was really nothing that could be done. All they could do was once again, simply wait and see.

Jane slid into her French class just before the bell. Amber was there, sitting on the opposite side of the classroom from Kayla and Ashley. Kayla was sporting an expensive new hair weave, zillions of perfect, tiny, chestnut colored braids framing her hostile face. Ashley was back to her old neo-preppy, politician-groupie look. They were both shooting daggers at Amber who looked thin and pale in a loose gray T-shirt and jeans. Amber's blonde hair was pulled back into a careless knot and she wore no makeup, but her posture was straight and confident and her blue eyes clear and focused.

Madame Koenig welcomed Amber back to the class and Jane waited anxiously for some eruption of drama. Nothing. After the bell rang, Amber went up to the teacher to talk about making up for her missed lessons and Jane walked slowly out, dawdling to see if anything would happen. Kayla and Ashley left and eventually, Jane had to hustle to her next class. The anticlimax of Amber's return was peculiar and inexplicable. By lunchtime, there was buzzing gossip all over the school about Amber having been to rehab and by the end of the day it was out that someone had used Amber's disappearance to force the other cheerleaders to humiliate themselves, though no one seemed to know exactly how. Jane and Lola were standing by Lola's

van and marveling over the uneventful day, when Amber appeared alone on the school steps. She squinted in the sun, looking around for something and Jane was horrified when Amber spotted them and walked briskly over to where they stood. Jane's heart stopped in her chest.

"Hey," Amber said.

"How's it going?" Lola replied casually, as if Amber Dunn chatted with her every day. Jane was too nervous to speak. This couldn't possibly be anything but the very worst of omens.

Amber looked around at the crowds of nearby students making no effort to disguise their unsubtle eavesdropping. "Can I talk to you guys?" she asked.

"About what?" Lola frowned.

"It's private," Amber said. "Maybe we could get some coffee or something."

Lola and Jane exchanged a look. "Okay, sure, why not?" Lola replied cautiously. She opened the passenger door for Amber. "Hop in."

Amber scooted into the middle of the back seat and Jane sat in front, feeling awkward and tongue-tied. She couldn't help but think of the last time Amber had been in this van. They drove in prickly silence to the only non-franchise coffee house in town, an arty little hole in the wall called Java 6.

The place was dim but not dim enough to hide the truly awful paintings on display, complete with extravagant prices and the artist's hopeful business card. They were mostly naked women with catheads, painted in lurid, nursery school colors. The messy haired and sneering boy behind the counter turned all goofy eyed at the sight of Amber, and he gave her a free scone and a badly printed flyer for his band, Backwash.

"Bring your friends," he said magnanimously, as if he was doing them a big favor. Jane rolled her eyes.

"Thanks, but I'm a recovering alcoholic," Amber said, handing the flyer back to him. "I don't do bars anymore. Or musicians."

Lola snorted and the boy looked crestfallen as he scribbled down their order. Vanilla latte for Lola, Earl Grey for Jane and a double

espresso for Amber. When Mr Backwash was finally able to peel his gaze off the front of Amber's shirt and make their drinks, they carried their cups over to a table in the far back corner. All of the tables and chairs were mismatched antiques. The table they chose had eagle feet clutching red glass balls. There was a mushy purple sofa on one side and a leather wingback on the other. Lola and Jane took the sofa, Amber on the other side in the chair.

Amber sipped her espresso from the tiny cup and then put it down, spinning it in its saucer. "This is really weird, I know," she finally said, refusing to meet their gazes. "But I want to apologize."

Jane and Lola frowned, disbelieving. Jane concentrated on fishing the teabag from her cup and wrapping its string around the spoon to squeeze it out.

"I mean," Amber continued, "it's part of my recovery to make amends with everyone that I hurt while I was drinking."

"Yeah, well how does that explain teasing me in first period French?" Jane asked, her teeth clenched with hostile skepticism. "You weren't drunk then."

Amber blushed a little, spinning her cup. "Not in first period," she said quietly.

"You were drinking in school?" Lola asked, eyes wide. "You're shitting me."

Amber nodded. "I always kept a couple of those pump hairspray bottles filled with booze," she said. "Vodka, so no one would smell it on my breath. I kept two in my locker, one in my backpack. I would sneak sips in the bathroom stalls, between and even during classes. I just couldn't function unless I was buzzed and I was terrified all the time. All the time."

"Jeez," Lola said. Jane was silent.

"I started when I was thirteen. When I was drinking, I was fun and cool and sexy. A party girl that everyone liked. Then it got to the point where I couldn't stand to be sober. I knew I was out of control but I didn't know how to stop. I slept with guys I barely knew, just to feel wanted. I would wake up in my car with no idea where I was or how I got there. Last year I got pregnant. I had no clue who the father could have been. I was trashed when I went in for the abortion

and I'm pretty sure the cab driver who took me home had sex with me before he dropped me off on my parents lawn. My parents were in Hong Kong. I bled for two weeks and almost died, but my parents never returned my calls. I don't know what went wrong but the doctor screwed up in there somehow and I now can't have any kids at all."

She looked down at her cup. Jane was utterly appalled by this sudden gush of personal revelation. It was as if she needed Amber to be a terrible, inhuman enemy and now that she was seeing her mortal foe stripped of armor, it made her feel as if the order of the universe had been maliciously rearranged.

"I have no memory of the night I was checked into rehab. They said two friends checked me in, but I knew it wasn't Kayla, Shayne or Ashley. Those bitches would eat me alive the second they saw me stumble. The way the night nurse described the two friends, it sounded a lot like you two."

What the hell were they supposed to say to that? Amber continued.

"It was you, wasn't it?" She smiled and shook her head. "I treated you like dirt, and you saved my life."

"Well," Lola said, smirking, "we didn't exactly do it out of the goodness of our hearts."

"Yeah, I heard all about the kidnapping video. That was you guys too, wasn't it?"

Jane eyed Amber, not entirely willing to believe that she had really turned over a new leaf. She had found herself feeling sorry for Amber the night they checked her in, but now she was leery and skeptical, afraid that it was all an elaborate set-up for some thermonuclear retribution.

"It's okay," Amber said. "I wouldn't trust me either. But don't worry, I won't say anything. Well..." She finished her espresso. "I better get going. I just want you to accept my apology. I know I was wrong to pick on others because of my own insecurity and I have to take responsibility for my actions. I hope you'll find a way to forgive me. If it makes you feel better, I've been kicked off the cheerleading squad." Amber sneered and made her voice high-pitched and officious. "An admitted substance abuser is not the sort of person

that we want to represent the Hemingway High School spirit." Amber stood and laughed bitterly.

"You need a lift?" Lola asked, downing the last of her latte.

Amber shook her head and slung her backpack over her shoulder "My meeting's right around the corner at First Methodist."

"Well, okay then..." Lola said.

"Oh, and don't worry about getting any trouble from my so-called friends over that video."

"Why not?" Lola asked.

"They think I did it," Amber said.

Jane watched the blonde walk away, speechless and flabbergasted.

"Can you believe that?" Lola asked as soon as Amber was out of earshot.

Jane shook her head. "I don't know what to believe."

It hadn't even occurred to Jane to think that Amber might get the blame for their stunt but it did make an awful kind of sense. After all, she was in the video. If she wasn't really kidnapped, then she must have been in on it. Those girls didn't have the mental candlepower to figure out what had actually happened so they would go for the obvious target. Who better to take the fall than a fallen star?

Normally that would have been perfect justice for Amber's myriad crimes against Jane and Lola, and every other geek in the school, but Jane had lost her objectivity and had allowed herself to feel empathy for the girl. She didn't know if she could feel good about Amber's demise anymore. She had it coming, but somehow the victory had soured. Jane swallowed the last sip of milky tea and wondered what the next few days would bring.

It wasn't until the following Friday that the cheerleaders struck out against their former queen. Lola called Jane's cell phone during lunch period, telling her to haul ass to the third floor girl's room. Jane could hear whistles and cat calls in the background. She left her sandwich and half-drunk soda on the table, and took off at top speed.

When she made it to the girl's bathroom there was a crowd outside the door. Lola was there and as soon as she saw Jane, she grabbed her arm and muscled the gawkers out of the way, pulling Jane into the bathroom.

In the last stall, Amber was being held down by Ashley and Kayla while Shayne emptied a bottle of cheap gin into Amber's mouth. Amber spat and choked while the excess ran down the front of her shirt. Shayne laughed and poured the rest over Amber's head. Amber's blonde hair was soaked, her face crimson with shame and fury. She thrashed in the cheerleaders' grip, but they held her fast while Shayne cracked the cap of a second bottle. All around them, girls were chanting.

"CHUG CHUG CHUG CHUG!"

"We gotta help her," Lola said.

"They'll eat us alive." Jane looked around at all the primal, contorted faces, hooting like chimpanzees whipped into a killing frenzy. She had never been in a physical confrontation in her life and had hoped to keep it that way, but Lola was right, they couldn't just stand by and let Amber suffer.

"Fuck it," Lola said and dove at Shayne, causing the bottle to drop and smash against the tile.

The prospect of an actual fight was apparently so much more interesting than simple torture that everyone cheered and made space for the flailing pair, unwilling to interfere with such an exciting spectacle. Echoes of "CATFIGHT!" started attracting boys who pushed their way in, sniggering as Shayne's blue cotton thong panties and pale, meager buttcheeks were revealed beneath her rucked up skirt. Lola was clearly stronger but Shayne fought like a rabid weasel, screeching and gouging Lola's face with her long nails. Kayla and Ashley let go of Amber and ran to cheer on their new leader and Jane ran to Amber's side.

Amber was crying and hugging herself, and Jane put her arm around the damp and shaking girl. She looked up at Jane and fisted tears from her mascara smeared eyes.

"Am I a geek now?" she asked, laughing through her tears.

"Yeah," Jane said, handing Amber an antique handkerchief embroidered with delicate swallows. "I think you are."

Ms Tanner, the gym teacher, burst in at that moment, blowing her whistle. Lola let go of Shayne and the skinny girl staggered back into the arms of her fellow bullies.

"What the hell is going on in here?" she hollered. Pausing, she sniffed the air. "Have you girls been drinking on school property?"

The crowd slipped away like cockroaches, leaving only the cheerleaders, Amber, Lola and Jane.

"It was Amber," Shayne said. "I guess rehab didn't work."

"Bullshit," Lola replied. "They poured the shit all over her. I saw it."

"That's right," Jane said.

"No way," Kayla said. "Nobody made her do it. She's out of control."

"Shayne tried to stop her," Ashley piped up. "Then Lola went crazy and attacked Shayne for, like, no reason."

"I want all six of you in the principal's office," Ms Tanner said. "Now."

Jane and Lola waited for Amber who was last to disappear into the tweedy inner sanctum of the principal, Mr Ratner. The cheerleaders had been interviewed first and left looking smug and justified. Jane went in next and told her version of what happened with her heart pounding in her chest. She knew she was telling the truth, but the grim and silent Mr Ratner still made her feel as if she were lying. He clearly did not believe a word she said. Lola was given detention along with Shayne because "Fighting is not an acceptable method of problem solving at Hemingway High, regardless of the circumstances." They were still waiting to hear Amber's fate.

When Amber came out of the office, she seemed beaten and defeated. She had not been allowed to rinse off and still stank of gin.

"That's that, I guess," Amber said.

"Well, what did Ratty say?" Jane asked.

"I've been expelled," Amber said. Again, that bitter half-laugh. "I was drinking in school every day since I was a freshman and was never caught, but now that I stopped, I'm finally being expelled for it."

"Aw man," Lola said. "That's bullshit. You gotta fight it."

Amber shook her head. "What's the point?" she said. "I don't want to be here anymore. My parents don't care. They were going to be in Barcelona for my graduation anyway."

"Well," Jane said, unable to help herself, "you can't just throw your education away. You give up now and I promise you'll regret it. You have the rest of your life to consider."

Amber shrugged. "I'll just get my GED and apply for college somewhere far, far away. Start a whole new life." She looked up at Jane. "Think you could help me study for the test?"

Jane smiled. "Of course."

Lola curled her fists into G's and started chanting: "Gooble gabble, we accept you, we accept you, one of us, one of us."

Jane touched her fists to Lola's and joined in the chant.

"One of us, one of us."

Amber smiled and curled up her hands like theirs.

"Geek girls are go," Lola said.

"Boy," Amber said, "if someone sent a video tape of my life now back in time to my old self, I never would have believed it."

"You ain't kidding," Lola replied.

"And I have a feeling it's just going to get weirder," Jane said.

"Can I borrow your cell?" Amber asked. "Shayne threw mine in the toilet."

"Sure," Jane said, fishing out her new phone.

"I need to call my sponsor," Amber said, dialing. "An involuntary gin shower doesn't exactly count as a relapse, but I still feel pretty shaky."

Jane and Lola sat with Amber on the steps, waiting for this "sponsor" to show up. They heard her before they saw her, the gruff thunder of a motorcycle echoing down the block. When the bike pulled up, the leather-clad woman astride the machine removed her helmet, revealing a worn, heavily lined face and faded denim eyes.

Her thin blonde hair was bound with a leather clasp and ugly, garish tattoos crept out from under her collar and up across her neck. She looked to be in her fifties, but was probably younger, prematurely aged by years of hard living. Amazingly, Amber threw her arms around the woman like she was a long lost sister.

"TJ, this is Lola and Jane," Amber said.

The woman took Jane's meekly offered hand and squeezed it till the bones popped. "It's great to finally meet you guys," she said in a sandblasted, two-pack-a-day voice. "I've heard a lot about you."

"All bad I hope," Lola said, grinning. "Cool bike."

TJ allowed Lola to enthuse over the various features of her motorcycle while Jane whispered to Amber. "That's your sponsor?" she asked, incredulous.

Amber nodded. "You know," she said. "I have way more in common with TJ than I ever did with those shallow bitches I used to hang around with."

Jane looked doubtfully at the biker.

"Ready, kid?" TJ asked, handing Amber a helmet.

"Yeah," Amber replied, strapping the helmet onto her head and straddling the bike.

Lola and Jane waved as TJ kicked the bike into gear and rode away. When they looked back at the school, they saw a dozen hands reaching for a dozen cell phones, ready to spread the news about Amber's expulsion and subsequent departure from Hemingway on the back of a Harley hog.

SEVEN

Jane sat on the stone wall outside the school, waiting for Lola and Amber. Her private journal was open in her lap, but her pen just dangled pointlessly over an incomplete sentence.

Victory is ours, but...

Instead of writing, she was watching the other students walk by. Pretty, popular girls would not meet her eye, but several chubby, geeky students, both male and female, smiled and gave her the thumbs up. Once the word got out that Lola had "kicked Shayne's ass," and people started to nibble around the truth about the video, Lola and Jane became almost like celebrities. A force to be reckoned with. They were referred to in reverential whispers as the Petticoat Mafia and the Geekgirl Gang. She had no idea how to cope with her newfound infamy.

She was rummaging in her knapsack for a violet candy when she realized someone was walking towards her. A boy. A strapping, athletic boy with dark eyes and a quirky smile. He was Latino, medium height and his head was shaved down to dark stubble as per some kind of Southern California zoning law that seemingly applied to all heterosexual Latino males under the age of forty-five. He wore loose-fitting black jeans that rode low on his lean waist and a white wife-beater undershirt that showed off thick, muscular arms and broad shoulders. He was carrying a gym bag, a large sketch book and a pair of wrestling boots tied together at the laces. Completely from another planet. Her heart clenched and a thick wash of spiky shyness rippled through her.

She felt antsy and intimidated by the overt masculinity of his physique, standing so close to her. She could not conceive of why a guy like him would want to talk to her.

"You're Jane DeHaan, right?" he said. He had a faint trace of an accent, something almost southern-sounding blended into the slightly singsong intonations of Mexican Spanish.

She nodded, unable to hold his gaze. She looked down at her slender, Victorian boots, waiting for him to call her a corpse fucker or

something equally heinous.

"I'm Brandon Ortiz," he said instead. "Was that really you who made that video with Amber and forced Shayne Donovan to eat a whole box of chocolate?"

Jane had no idea how to answer that. Would he beat her up if she said yes? She narrowed her eyes at him, trying to pull a sort of worldly nonchalance over her inner paranoia.

"Well, it was pretty hilarious." He laughed, shaking his head. "Believe me that neurotic bitch deserved it, but I gotta tell you honestly, your timing really sucks."

"What?" She had absolutely no idea where this conversation was going

"Our wrestling team has a big meet tomorrow. We're up against Immaculate Heart. They kicked our asses twice already." He shook his head. "If we lose this one we'll all be wearing tutus on Monday morning."

Jane smiled at the image of this thick, masculine guy and all the other burly jocks on the wrestling team wearing pink tutus. She looked up at his face and saw that he was smiling too. She looked away again. He wasn't exactly what you would call handsome. His nose had been broken and healed badly and his *cafe con leche* skin was marred by scattered acne, but his eyes drew her relentlessly in. Intense and sharp, sparkling with secret mirth. Clearly he was no Mr Darcy, the haughty yet dashing suitor of Austen's Lizzie Bennett. Or even Mr Bingley, the debonair and light hearted suitor of Jane Bennett. Or any other Jane Austen archetype for that matter, but she could still see how terribly easy it would be to fall for those dark eyes. She sternly reminded herself that a dozen other thinner, more attractive girls probably already had. He was just talking to her. She could not allow herself to start getting any ideas.

"That's tragic," she forced herself to say, trying to figure out what he really wanted. "But what in the world does this imminent transvestitism have to do with Shayne Donovan?"

Jane's vocabulary always quadrupled when she was nervous, a weird and inexplicable geek defense mechanism. She had expected to lose the jock with her last sentence. Surprisingly, his eyes did not

glaze over with Neanderthal confusion, he simply smiled and responded, "Well, Shayne is Connor's girlfriend."

"Who?"

"Connor Hall," he said. "You know, our fearless leader. Olympic hopeful. The best and strongest wrestler on our team."

"Oh..." She could sort of picture a boy she had seen a few times manhandling Shayne against her locker. Blond and generically handsome. A standard issue Ken-doll type, destined to lose his hair and get paunchy, and become an alcoholic used car salesman.

"So you see," Brandon continued, "after what will be known forever in Hemingway history as the chocolate incident,' Shayne has been refusing to give it up for Connor until she can lose the imaginary five pounds she thinks she's gained. It's been nearly three weeks and she still says she can't be touched right now because she..." He made quote marks in the air with his fingers. "'Feels fat.'"

Jane let out a disbelieving laugh. "Poor thing," she said. "What, did she finally break three digits on the scale? I don't see how she can stand to leave the house, the enormous beast."

Brandon chuckled. "Yeah, I don't get it either," he said. "Me, I have no interest in banging bones with some chick built like a Day of the Dead skeleton puppet. I like more meat on a girl.'

Jane wrapped her arms self-consciously across her tummy. How the hell did they get onto this topic of conversation? She couldn't help but notice the direction of his gaze dipping down to her breasts beneath her roomy velvet blouse and then back up to her face.

"Anyway," he said, "for whatever reason, Connor seems to like nailing that skinny bitch and now that she won't put out, he's becoming really impossible to deal with. Short fuse, flying off the handle at every little thing, that kind of thing. We're afraid he'll blow it tomorrow."

Jane raised her eyebrows. "You mean to tell me he's actually faithful to that stick insect?"

Brandon shrugged. "So far. She's got him on a pretty short leash, but honestly at this point, I think she's pressing her luck."

"Well then," Jane said. "Perhaps the sexual frustration will make him twice as aggressive. Roman gladiators were not allowed to have

sex before a fight. Maybe all that pent-up testosterone will give your team the edge to finally achieve victory over those ruffians from Immaculate Heart."

"You know," Brandon said, "I never thought of it like that."

"In a way, I did you a favor." she said, a smile creeping back across her lips. "Maybe if you win tomorrow, you should make it standard team policy. No sex allowed before a big match."

Brandon snorted and shook his head. "I highly doubt the rest of the team would go for it," he said. "Not that I'd have to worry about breaking a rule like that. Nobody's beating down my door wanting to drain my testosterone right at the moment."

Jane blushed fiercely. Was he coming on to her, this alien? How could she possibly respond to a comment like that? Luckily, Lola picked that moment to show up and rescue her. She zipped over on her skateboard and came to a grating sideways stop, stomping on the tail of the board so it shot up into her hand.

"Hey, Jane," she said. "Who's the Chippendale?"

"I'm Brandon," he answered. "And I hate to burst your bubble, but my pants are stitched solid." He tugged on the waistband as if to demonstrate. "No velcro."

Lola laughed and Jane couldn't help but join in.

"I gotta go," he said, slinging his bag up on his shoulder. "But why don't you come to the meet tomorrow. Four pm in the gym. See if your Gladiator theory really works."

Amber appeared at that moment, carrying her GED study guide. "Gladiator theory?" She grinned. "Do tell."

Even though the blonde was clad in a simple white cotton hoody shirt and jeans, Jane couldn't help but feel a twinge of body-conscious jealousy and she found herself automatically wrapping her arms around her belly again. She had no reason to care. What difference did it make to her if Brandon's sudden, inexplicable attention shifted to Amber's fiercely aerobicized form? In fact, that would actually make far more sense. Guys like him always went for girls like Amber. It was unshakable, hormonal physics. Yet, he simply smiled politely at Amber and then waved and turned to go.

"Brandon Ortiz?" Amber said, once Brandon was out of earshot. "Nice choice."

"It's nothing like that." Jane shook her head.

"No?" Amber arched an eyebrow. "I hear he's got a nice big—"

"Please!" Jane covered her ears, face and neck blushing a deep crimson. "I do not need to know that."

"I haven't had it myself, of course." Amber said. "The wrestling team was always Shayne's hunting ground, not mine."

"Well, neither will I," Jane said. "The last thing I need is some brutish, heavily-endowed hormone puppet assaulting my virginity with hamfisted charm and shallow promises to respect me in the morning."

"Wow," Lola said, grinning. "Tell us what you really think."

"He transferred from somewhere in Texas in the middle of last year," Amber continued, warming to the gossip and ignoring Jane's outburst. "Lives over on the other side of Main, deep in Mexican gangland, but gets bussed here because he's smart. Definitely not just a meathead jock. Oh, and he's an artist, too. Maybe if you're nice to him, he'll show you his sketchbook."

"Forget it," Jane said.

"Rumor has it," Amber continued, eyebrows raised significantly. "That he got his heart broken by an older woman."

"So?"

"So," Amber said. "I'm guessing he not only knows where the magic button is, he probably knows what to do with it."

"That's it," Jane said, hefting her backpack. "I have had it with this conversation."

"Yeah," said Amber. "We better go and make with the math so I'll be done in time for my meeting." She paused. "I guess you won't be available to study with me tomorrow, huh?"

"Of course I will," Jane said. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"But what about the wrestling meet tomorrow afternoon?"

"Absolutely not," Jane shook her head adamantly. "There is no way in hell that I am going to waste an afternoon watching that kind of base, vulgar display."

Jane sat on the uncomfortable bleachers, shifting her weight and feeling horribly self-conscious. She had found herself fretting for longer than usual that morning in the mirror, smoothing her hands over her belly and trying on a dozen different outfits. When she realized she was actually worrying about what to wear to see Brandon again, she was mortified at her own girly foolishness. What did it matter if she wore a chicken suit or a bag over her head? It's not like she cared what he thought about her anyway. Yet she still somehow found herself sporting a far deeper *décolletage* than she would ever consider on a normal school day. When Lola saw her that morning, she eyed Jane's prominently displayed cleavage, gave her a smirking, significant look and said nothing. Now she sat with Lola in the bleachers, wishing that she had chosen to wear something more modest.

Amber slid into the seat beside Jane and kissed her cheek.

"Don't you look foxy," she said. "Hubba hubba."

"Aren't you going to get in trouble if Ratty sees you here?" Jane asked sourly.

"This is an after school event," Amber said, gesturing to the scattering of moms and dads and other family members in the stands. "Non-students are allowed. And don't change the subject. You look hot. I'm sure he'll be riveted."

Down in the center of the gym, two lean and sweat-slick boys rolled around together, clad in strange, strappy plastic earmuffs and preposterous little one-piece spandex outfits. They looked sort of like early twentieth century bathing costumes, but skintight, leaving nothing to the imagination. The Hemingway team was clad in their school colors, red with black stripes, and the Immaculate Heart team wore blue and gold. Every part of the boys' muscular bodies was on display as they cycled through various splayed and uncomfortable-looking positions. The whole thing seemed blatantly sexual in a perverse sort of way. It was a direct affront to Jane's Victorian sensibility yet she found herself unable to look away.

"Careful, Jane," Lola said, leaning over and poking Jane in the arm. "You may not technically be a virgin anymore after watching something this manly. In fact, I think I might be starting to grow chest hair from all the testosterone in the air."

Amber laughed. "You know," she said. "I've given up using my sexuality to make people like me and my sponsor has advised me to be celibate during the first six months of my recovery." She grinned devilishly. "But I'm suddenly feeling seriously in danger of back sliding."

Amber's eyes widened as the struggle intensified on the mat and she made a low, purring sound.

"Knock it off," Lola said. "We're here to get Jane laid, not you."

"Excuse me," Jane said. "I am not 'getting laid' by anyone. When I eventually choose to relinquish my virginity, it will be in a long-term relationship with an intellectual equal."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever you say," Lola said. "But until then, you can at least have a little fun."

Amber poked Jane's arm. "There he is," she said.

Jane was horrified by the leap her heart took inside her chest when she spotted Brandon standing with several teammates on the far side of the gym. He looked up at her and smiled. She almost raised her hand to wave and then caught herself and struggled not to smile back. No point encouraging him. She crossed her arms over her breasts. What on earth had possessed her to wear that blouse? She should have left on the purple one with the high neck.

A boy from Immaculate Heart won the match that had been going on when the girls were talking, and then it was Brandon's turn. He and his opponent, a thickly built Filipino boy with a flat top and close set eyes, stood facing each other inside the yellow circle on the dark green mat, toes aligned with a pair of short lines about a foot apart at the center. The ref spoke to them both and then blew his whistle and they suddenly started grappling furiously. After a fierce tussle, Brandon was able to lift his opponent off the ground and throw him down to the mat. The ref held up two fingers.

"Two for takedown," the ref said and the other spectators cheered.

It seemed to go on and on with each boy apparently trying to push the other down on his back, and the other doing everything he could to prevent it. Then, for no reason Jane could ascertain, it was suddenly over and Brandon was declared the winner, even though no one had been pushed down on their back. Brandon looked up at her and smiled as the ref held his hand in the air. He looked so funny in those plastic earmuffs and she couldn't help but smile back.

She let her mind drift as several other matches took place, but she couldn't help noticing that Connor won his in under a minute, easily forcing his opponent's shoulders down on the mat.

Then it was over and Jane tried to sneak away but Lola and Amber caught her by the elbows and dragged her over to where Brandon stood high-fiving his teammates. Connor gave them the evil eye, but Brandon smiled at her, wiping sweat from his face with a towel. He had taken off the ear thingies but still had a wide red line across his forehead from the strap.

"I guess you were right," he said.

It was all Jane could do not to look down at the bulge beneath his singlet, finding herself morbidly aware of what Amber had said about him. Obviously they all wore those athletic protector cups beneath their uniforms so it wasn't as if you could really make anything out in that area and she didn't even want to know anyway, but it was awfully hard not to look. Really, he might as well be naked and his body was truly amazing in its muscular perfection. Not that she cared about physical attributes. It was the mind that really mattered. But still...

"Maybe we could get together sometime," Brandon said.

Jane's heart stopped. He must have seen her looking at his crotch. Her cheeks felt hot enough to fry an egg.

"She'd love to," Amber answered.

"How about this weekend?" Lola asked.

"What, are you two my pimps?" Jane asked, pushing the two girls away. "I don't know Brandon." Awkward shyness choked her. "It's just... I mean..."

"Hey," Brandon said softly. "It's okay. Don't worry about it." He seemed a little shy now, maybe embarrassed or afraid of rejection.

He shrugged his shoulders self-consciously. "Anyway thanks for coming. I guess I'll catch you later."

"Okay," Jane said pointlessly to his back as he walked away. "And congratulations on your victory."

He turned back and flashed a small, melancholy smile. Jane felt like a fool.

"That went well," Amber said facetiously.

"Shut up," Jane snapped. "You two are impossible."

"Jeez, Jane," Lola said. "It's just a date. It wouldn't kill you. He's cute. He's smart. He's obviously into you. Give the guy a chance why don't you?"

"Look, I'll think about it, okay?" Jane tugged the neckline of her blouse a little higher.

"Too much thinking gives you brain cancer," Lola said. "You've spent your whole life thinking. For once, why don't you just jump?"

It wasn't until Jane saw his sketchbook that she decided to go out with Brandon after all.

She was in the lunch room, looking for a place to sit when she spotted Brandon sitting alone and sketching at one of the few empty tables.

Just jump, she thought.

She sucked in a deep breath and ordered her feet to carry her over to his table. He was wearing headphones and was utterly absorbed in drawing. He did not notice her. She looked down at the open page of his sketchbook and for a moment, she could not believe what she saw.

It was unquestionably a drawing of her, glasses and long black hair and all. She was held in the muscular arms of a skull-masked wrestler, as if he was about to carry her over the threshold. She was barely dressed in a tiny skull bikini and high-heeled boots and held a tiny black parasol over her head. Brandon had lovingly detailed every curve and crease of her overabundant body, her little round belly, her thick legs and full voluptuous ass. Her white breasts spilled over the

edges of the little bikini top. Where the wrestler's hands held her, his big fingers sank into her soft flesh. Everything she hated about herself was highlighted in the most worshipful, idealized fashion.

When he noticed her he jumped a little and the slender headphones fell off his head, releasing a tinny ghost of some kind of Latin-flavored jazz.

"Man, you scared me," he said. He looked down at the drawing, tried feebly to cover it with his hands and then gave up and ran a palm over the stubble on his head. "Oh... uh... well..."

"That's me, isn't it?" Jane asked.

Brandon nodded sheepishly. "Yeah, well," he said, "I draw this character named Calavera de Ultratumba." Brandon flipped through some of the other pages, revealing rough comic book panels mostly featuring the skull-masked guy, sometimes in a sharp suit, sometimes in tights and a cape. "And he needed a cute, brainy sidekick. I guess I sorta used you as the model."

Jane was utterly charmed. "Can I have a look at the rest?" she asked.

"Sure, of course."

Jane sat beside him and flipped through the book. The skull-masked wrestler fought a gorilla, a robot, a crowd of thugs. The drawings were really good, slightly surreal and off-kilter with a distinctly Mexican, Day of the Dead folk art sort of flavor. Jane couldn't help but notice that all the girls in the drawings were voluptuous and rounded, built just like Jane. Of course, she had always imagined her perfect man would be slowly drawn in by her subtle wit and intelligence, but she could not deny how good it felt to be physically admired by someone for whom she embodied the feminine ideal. Girls like Amber were probably sick of it, but this was truly the first time Jane really felt physically attractive. He liked her belly. How could she not love that?

She quietly ate her lunch and enjoyed his furtive gaze on her body while they talked of unimportant things. He told her where he had lived when he was a child; a beautiful little colonial town in Mexico called Guanajuato.

"The soil is so dry and alkaline that dead bodies naturally mummify," he said. "There is a museum there filled with these mummies. Men, women, even babies. I used to hang around there all the time as a kid, drawing them and making up stories where they would come to life and attack the older boys who used to tease me."

"You used to get teased?" Jane found it hard to believe that anyone would tease a guy like Brandon.

"All the time," he said. "My mother was from Mexico City and had been divorced. She was kind of a rebel. Anyway, I wasn't always the Chippendale you see before you today."

Jane laughed, trying to imagine a younger, geekier Brandon and found it difficult. "Did you ever get teased here at Hemingway?" she asked.

"Sometimes guys fuck with me because I'm Mexican. Call me wetback or ask to see my Green Card. They make like they're just kidding, but I wonder sometimes." He shrugged. "But that shit don't get to me. It's the same all over. You just gotta stick up for yourself, that's all. Just like you guys did with those evil cheerleaders."

Jane smiled and met his gaze for the longest five seconds of her life. Feeling weirdly vulnerable, she looked away. The bell rang suddenly and she stood up too fast.

"Well..." she said.

"Here," he said, tearing the drawing of her from the book. "You can keep this one. And if you get in trouble, you can always count on Calavera to back you up."

"Thanks," Jane said.

"See you around, then."

Jane slid the drawing carefully into her binder.

"Yeah," she said. "See you."

EIGHT

Nervous anticipation took on a whole new meaning for Jane once she agreed to go out with Brandon. Like Lola, he came out of left field—oh, Christ, it wasn't even a field. It was more like he was from another solar system entirely. But that drawing absolutely won her over. He had found her true weak spot: the need to feel beautiful and special. Jane felt badly for writing off Brandon as a typical jock so thoughtlessly.

She got up extra early that morning before school to experiment with makeup and apply it more carefully than usual. She felt obligated to try and figure out the whole baffling process once and for all and even printed out several helpful hints from websites devoted to various techniques. Ultimately, all she wanted was the ability to manage a typical Gothic sweep of black liquid liner and to find a way to keep her mascara from smearing. It was particularly difficult in the hotter weather to not come home with dark smudges under her eyes. For the first time ever she considered asking her mother about contact lenses. In the past, she would never have dreamed of asking for such a frivolous and uncharacteristically vain item. Now, it suddenly seemed like a reasonable idea.

Without naming names or providing any explicit detail, Jane blew off a little of her dating angst on her Live Journal, describing her battle with the mascara wand in what she hoped was a witty and self-deprecating way. When she posted her entry, she felt a little lighter, more centered.

Luckily, that morning the heat had subsided and a haze settled over the face of the school, leaving Jane's mascara on her lashes where it belonged.

It will probably burn off, Jane thought glumly, but at least it's not relentlessly sunny.

As soon as the day started, Jane remembered that they were heading into midterms already. For once, that was her only real concern as she navigated the hallways. The unprecedented acceptance she and Lola had won with their victory over the bullies

(*Vive la Révolution!*) put her at such ease that she realized she'd been defensive most of her life. She had sort of grown accustomed to the pinch between her shoulder blades and the heavy sarcasm that crouched under her tongue. She would always be cynical, to be sure—the world would ever be a bleak, miserable, and unreliable place that would invariably conspire to wear her down and destroy her happiness—but she didn't have to slink through the day under the unmitigated assault of her so-called peers.

But was she truly happy? There was no point even thinking about it. She hadn't really been happy since the day her father passed away when she was eleven.

At first, all they knew was that something stole in and wiped out her father's immune system with silent, cat burglar stealth. In the beginning, he had the flu all the time and complained of all sorts of pains. Well, he didn't really complain, more like he made faces and insisted he was okay when he clearly wasn't. Her mother panicked at the unusual number of infections and viruses, the weight loss and the fatigue, and forced him to have an HIV test. Jane remembered the tearful arguments that ensued: accusations of infidelity, possibly homosexual relationships. For a time, Jane withdrew from her mother, thinking she was horribly cold for making her father feel so badly when he was already sick. She didn't realize that there might have been some history or red son for the accusations. Later, when they lived in San Francisco, her mother explained as much as she could to Jane. There had been "an incident that her mother refused to say much about except that it ruptured every seam of trust in the marriage. By then, Jane was older and a little more understanding, and her mother had not said a bad word about her father since his death. So she was able to forgive her mother, as much as any teenager can forgive a parent.

But her father's illnesses were one day followed by a moment that was the turning point of all their lives. They were moving yet again and her father lifted a box—nothing heavy, just some kitchen stuff, pots and pans and things like that—and he cut his finger on the point of a protruding knife. He'd had a niggling pain in his lower back, but suddenly there was a lightning strike to his entire spine and his

finger bled like he'd cut his wrist. He dropped the box and cried out as he seemed to implode there on the carpet in a pile of quivers and gasps. Jane ran to him and tried to help him stand, but he couldn't get up. Then she saw the blood. Her mother was packing the car with the computers when she heard Jane screaming. Her mother's face turned sickly white when she saw her husband crumpled on the floor. She grabbed a dust cloth and tried to stop the bleeding of his finger, having Jane press on a place farther up on his arm. When her mother couldn't get him up and into the car, she tried to help him lie more comfortably. That's when she saw it: a red stripe ran down the back of his calf.

"Watch your father," she said, scrambling to her feet and going into the kitchen.

The next thing Jane heard was her mother on the phone asking someone to send an ambulance.

At the hospital, her father learned that the stripe was a blood clot. But that wasn't all. The cat burglar had finally been unmasked. He had leukemia.

Jane was left with her grandparents while her father was transported by ambulance to a special cancer center at Stanford. Later, when he underwent treatments, Jane watched him suffer through the slow torture of chemotherapy. He lost his hair and had what he called "The Devil's Hangovers," where he would vomit all day but nothing came up. Sores encrusted his mouth like barnacles. He still got sick. A lot. It was as if he was ten times sicker than he was when he was just getting the flu every other week. He slept all the time and didn't want to eat. The doctor's promised that they had high remission rates, that it was something her father could beat in the short term if not for many years to come. But there was no cure. He would be susceptible for years once they drove the beast back into its cave.

The worst part was not knowing what caused it. They told Jane that leukemia has no known risk factors. They thought maybe genetics and environmental factors were an influence. However, Jane quickly discovered the real truth behind all the medical rhubarb

and patronizing hand patting. The truth was they knew nothing. Absolutely nothing.

Her father collapsed completely not long after the treatment. He was far too sick and the cancer was too far spread for the chemotherapy to work. They talked about bone marrow transplants. They had to find a family member willing to donate bone marrow. While her father lay in the hospital dying, her mother desperately made phone call after phone call. Siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles. Every one of them had the same answer. Every one refused to help.

Of course, by then it was too late. One night, just a week after the moving incident, her father started bleeding in his brain. They immediately performed surgery, but it was no use. He was gone. Jane would never forget the stiff, practiced sympathy on the faces of the doctors, telling her they did their best.

Four years later, Jane read that they finally figured out how to treat acute promyelocytic leukemia: without chemotherapy. Time and medicine had robbed them, cheating them by four short years. Four years? Was that it? Chinese researchers had apparently discovered the cure years before, but it hadn't been accepted by American doctors. Jane found this on the Internet and, against her better judgment, showed her mother. While her mother took it well at first, Jane watched her slip into a prolonged depression. Neither of them could function well after that. Knowing that there had been a treatment that could have saved his life was too much.

After his death, Jane often dreamed of her father. Sometimes she would wake up in the night to find a form slumped in a chair she'd set in the far corner of her room.

"Hi Daddy," she would whisper.

The form would listlessly shift, gently breathing. Jane would softly whisper the events of her day, her fears and innermost thoughts and her father would listen. Never answer, just listen. Jane knew in her heart that it was just a dream. He wasn't really there. Her waking self knew this, but it still felt good to have someone to talk to. She missed him with a vast, aching intensity that never really went away.

Since they moved to Southern California, Jane had not dreamed of her father. Not even once. Then again, she had not set up the chair

for him.

On her way to third period, Jane noticed a sullen girl with shoulder-length, licorice-red hair, her bangs somewhat choppy and uneven. A ring pierced the curve of her candy apple lower lip. Unlike Jane's delicate eyeliner job, the girl had smeared thick black kohl around her lids in cinder smudges, heightening the ethereal shine of her willow-green eyes. Those eyes flashed like Amtrak train lights across the hallways, they were so striking. Most of what she wore looked second hand: a tight black skirt that seemed as if it had been cut shorter and left unhemmed, and a long-sleeved, white cotton T-shirt with the ribbing torn out of the neck. On her big feet were strange, crumpled silver flats, the metallic coating starting to flake away from the leather. She didn't fit any particular subculture that Jane could identify. She just seemed kind of surly and unapproachable.

But the most noticeable thing about her was her build. Her full breasts and a round saucy backside that strained the fabric of her clothes with a tiny hourglass waist between. Unlike Ashley's boyish hips that contrasted with her ridiculous adolescent boob job, this girl's flesh was completely natural, perfectly proportioned, and oozing XXX-everything. No matter how she could have tried to hide her figure, only a Barnum & Bailey circus tent could have obscured her generous natural endowments.

While the girl had many enviable attributes, one pale cheek bore four deep scars, as if the claws of a big cat had struck her face. The scars were perfectly parallel; so neat, in fact, that Jane wondered if they were made on purpose, like some form of ritual scarification. When she and her mom lived in San Francisco, Jane's neighbor had an enormous German eagle scarred into his back, the open wings touching the midpoints of his shoulder blades. His name was Jake. He was in his mid-twenties with long brown hair and a goatee and he always called Jane, "little sister." Jane saw the scarring one day when he was shirtless, carrying his basket of laundry to the laundry room. He noticed her staring and showed it to her, explaining how they'd cut the eagle into his skin and then how it scabbed really badly. He said it was okay for her to touch it. Jane ran her fingers over the

pattern, fascinated by the swellings etched into his flesh. It was surprisingly detailed, like a tattoo but without the ink. He was a very cool guy, Jane had to admit, because he also knew all sorts of trivia about the German Renaissance, as well as Victorian England. He would dress up in period costume and go to the Dickens' Faire with his girlfriend, who wore bustle skirts, corsets and bonnets. Jane was insanely jealous and desperately wished he'd had it for her mom (or, better yet, herself), but she knew that was never going to happen. Besides, her mother was way too square and too old to ever like a guy like that.

But the scars on this girl could have been accidental, too. Or perhaps they were inflicted by someone out of malice. It made Jane slightly nauseated to think of it. The girl seemed almost proud of them, like dueling scars. Was she from San Francisco? Or Los Angeles? Maybe even as far away as New York? She could have been from almost anywhere. Jane felt confident she could pinpoint where the girl came from if she could only hear her speak.

As Jane moved on, she heard a girl behind her whisper to her friend. "I bet she's a lesbian. She looks like some kind of lesbo-psycho whore."

The voices shifted in the multiplying crowd of students and Jane lost the source of the disparaging remarks. Jane doubted highly that this girl was gay, any more than Lola was. It was just that, like Lola, she did not edit her appearance in order to conform to the desires and expectations of men, the way that all the other girls seemed to do. And somehow that simple fact was so profoundly disturbing, so utterly against everything they had been taught that mattered, that they were forced to fall back on easy, predictable insults to distance themselves from what they did not understand, and therefore must both hate and fear.

Apparently, the girl did not hear the comments, but then again, Jane always ignored comments like that herself and tried not to react to them. Jane watched for her when she went to lunch and noticed the girl shrinking against the far cement hallway wall of the smoker's corner in the courtyard, withdrawn and murky as she drew on a cigarette. She stared steadily at the ground, as if it were whispering

to her. It spooked Jane a little, but she herself had had many days of ground snooping in the not so distant past.

She all but forgot about the new girl until she met up with Lola and Amber down by the wall after the final period. They were dishing on the guys they had been with and how far they had gone. Amber was telling horror stories about various jocks, like one of the football players who had chased her for weeks and then been so trashed the night she finally said yes that he passed out on top of her. She had to scream and scream until two of his buddies realized her cries were distress, not ecstasy, and freed her from beneath his insensate, two hundred and twenty-five pound frame. And as Lola downed a bag of cheesy tortilla chips, she wove an entertaining, tantalizing tale about tying one of her boyfriends to a bicycle rack, feeling him up, and then leaving him there, exposed to the caresses of the wind and anyone else who might happen by. Apparently, this happened on a regular basis and he very much enjoyed it. Lola exposed and humiliated him whenever she got a chance and this made them both very hot.

"But what would happen if someone found him?" Jane asked.

"He'd be busted," Lola replied, sucking orange dust off her fingers "And I'd laugh. But usually we didn't get in trouble at all. I do stuff like that all the time. There was this one guy who wanted to be my pet, so I would cuff him to the stair railing by my class and make him wait until I got out."

"No way," Amber said.

"If anyone could keep a boy pet, it would be Lola," Jane ventured.

"Did he do tricks and stuff?" Amber asked.

Lola wriggled her eyebrows. "Hell yeah. And I taught him every one."

The two girls high-fived, Lola using the non-cheese dusted hand.

Jane felt distinctly left out. Her experience with boys was very limited. She'd had many crushes based entirely upon fantasy and the boy's GPA, but nothing more substantial. A number of those crushes were deeply conflicted scenarios in which she loved the boy for what he was (usually brilliant) and hated him for what he was not (in love with her). This legacy followed her from grade school to the present,

at which point she had concluded that the male race had earned her permanent contempt. Until maybe now.

Another clique of about four girls, wealthier ones whose parents gave them their own credit cards and had them spend their summers in Florence or Nice, formed a clot on the nearby stairs, much to the annoyance of Jane. These were ultrachic *fashionistas* who only dated college boys and spent most of their time obsessively accessorizing and worrying about things like this season's new skirt length or whether or not their new cell phone cover had the right look to adequately offset the fun, frivolous but still edgy, Debbie-Harry-on-crystal-meth look they were going for that millisecond. They were frequently overheard referring to whatever new heel-height, hairstyle or sexual position struck their fickle fancies as "the new" whatever they used to like the day before. "Prozac is the new Slimfast!" "The eighties are the new seventies!" Ugh. They had never been a real direct menace to Jane, except for one or two passing comments about the "Goth thing" being "so over", so she mostly ignored them. Until that day.

Their leader was Devon Berlin, a tall Jennifer Aniston wannabe whose eyes were set just slightly too far apart. She was notoriously tight in every way: money, ass, favors. Her real estate mogul daddy bought her a BMW Boxer, making every other car in the school parking lot look like a junk heap. Since it was only a two-seater, you had to really earn her favor to get a ride. Like a queen, she doled out such favors as if they were knighthoods. If anyone knew you'd been in her car, you were the envy of the school. Devon often mistook advantage for accomplishment, especially since she had been class president for the last two years running. She fully expected to win again this year, Jane had heard, despite everyone in her class tiring of her entitlement issues. Like Amber once had, Devon held court often and kept a small, endlessly rotating roster of female courtiers turned out from the mid-ranks of intelligence but the upper echelons of privilege and fashion. She tended to keep lower class men around her, fleshing out her entourage so that no one would notice when her popularity was waning.

Jane sighted Miss Cinder Eyes coming from a mile off. As she stopped to sling her bag onto the stone wall and slip a textbook inside, Devon's foot soldiers eyed the girl's clothes and one of them remarked, "Nice outfit. Where'd you get it? The donation box at the Salvation Army?"

Devon's friends snickered and made disparaging faces, as if being poor were a grave social offense, like peeing in public or vomiting on your best friend's shoes. Devon herself kept quiet and let her courtiers carry the heraldry into battle. That way no one could accuse her of bad mouthing anyone or committing social offenses any sort. Ever the budding politician, Devon always kept her own hands clean.

Miss Cinder Eyes didn't even look their way, but instead gave Devon and her trendy minions the one-fingered salute as she rummaged in her oversized army-surplus backpack.

"Such vulgarity," Devon said, more to her cohorts than the girl. "I don't think that's appropriate on school grounds."

"Maybe she's retarded and can't talk," Devon's Vice President, Monica Moore offered, a slim, dark-haired girl in Calvin Kleins and an expensive, hippie-dyed, cotton Betsy Johnson T-shirt that read: Love me like Twiggy. She was Devon's right-hand bitch, enforcer and some said the real power behind Devon's throne. "Scarface kinda looks like she belongs in a cage."

Miss Cinder Eyes zipped up her bag, keeping her finger in the air. "Eat my shit, bitch, if you got any teeth." She shouldered her backpack and glanced dead at Devon. "Which I doubt."

Jane heard Amber inhale sharply. She seemed to know that something was coming, but Jane didn't. What could a small clique of prissy, rich snobs possibly dish out?

"I've got better teeth than a bag head like you," Devon responded, turning to Monica.

Monica slipped her hand into her backpack and pulled out something slim, black and glossy. Jane couldn't tell what it was, but she heard a small *pop!* when the girl brought her hands together. One hand dropped to Monica's side, her hand discreetly covering the item she held.

Miss Cinder Eyes glanced at them warily, then tried to move past them by walking a wide circle around the group. But as she moved around them, Monica dropped her bag, broke away from her friends, and lunged like an Olympic fencer at the girl's back, extending her hand towards her shoulder blades.

Before anyone could see exactly what had happened, the harsh chemical burn of a permanent Sharpee pen wafted past Jane as she watched Monica slash repeatedly at the girl's white shirt. The Sharpee was fresh and left wide, black sweeps and scribbles on the girl's shirt. The girl tried to get away, but Monica bore down on her.

"Leave me the fuck alone." Miss Cinder Eyes cried. The other students watched her suffer, some merely stepping aside to avoid getting bled upon by the ink. She tried to grab the pen, but the girl had already done a great deal of damage to her shirt and now jabbed her with it wherever she could ink her.

"Oh, fuck that." Lola said, tossing her bag of chips to the ground. "Come on."

Immediately, Lola was on Monica, and Jane reluctantly followed before she could lose her nerve. Each girl grabbed one of Monica's arms and Lola peeled the pen out of her hand while Jane reprimanded her.

"You're a lousy artist," she hissed in Monica's ear. "And a lousier human being."

"Well," Devon said, "if it isn't Lesbo Lola and her dumpy sidekick, the Velvet Manatee."

Monica wrenched herself free and turned to face them. Lola held the pen like a pistol at the surprised girl, waving her on.

"Bring it, bitch. You want some of this on your Calvins?"

Meanwhile, Amber sauntered over to Devon and what was left of her courtiers, staring her down. Devon raised an eyebrow. For the first time, the two stood on opposite sides of the fence. This fact seeped into Devon by degrees in the few seconds of silent exchange. At last, Amber spoke.

"I don't think keeping this kind of company will further your political goals. In fact, I think it's going to hurt. Bad."

"You're not even supposed to be here, Amber." She made Amber's name sound like an insult. "Why don't you run off to your little AA meeting and mind your own business."

"I fucked your boyfriend," Amber said, killer smile bright and vicious and Jane shuddered, remembering what it was like to be on the business end of lioness Amber's formidable claws. "Last year, on the night of the junior prom, outside by the bleachers. I made him beg for it." She paused, allowing her prey to take a few bleeding steps, then dropped her voice and went in for the kill. "How'd my pussy taste when he kissed you for your prom portrait, Devon?"

Devon blanched. "Come on," she said to her friends, gathering them to her defenses. A wet sheen of shame and insecurity glistened in her eyes as she turned to leave. Monica backed away from Lola and snatched her backpack from the ground before resuming her place in Devon's entourage.

Lola found the cap on the sidewalk and capped the pen while Jane approached the strange new girl who was fretfully examining the black marks that striped her shirt and one of her sleeves. She then stroked the scars on her cheek with her inky knuckles; a distance in her eyes Jane sensed was unreachable.

"Are you okay?" Jane asked.

Those willow-greens lanced Jane with the heat of indignation. But, after a beat, the girl nodded and smiled. "Thanks," she said.

"I'm Jane DeHaan, and this is Lola Cole and Amber Dunn."

Lola grinned, extending her hand. "We're the Petticoat Mafia," she said. "We champion damsels in distress and tie up boys if they're lucky."

This last bit got a finger under the girl's lid and she smiled, shaking Lola's hand.

"I'm Rose." She seemed to gauge the brigade further and then added. "Rose Gibson."

"Good to meet you, Rose," Jane said.

She could smell traces of cigarette smoke clinging to Rose's clothes and hair, along with a kind of cheap, peachy perfume.

"Well," Rose said, "see you around."

The girl ducked her chin to her chest and turned away. Jane watched her go with a strange feeling in her stomach that she could not quite define.

That night, another nightmare. Upon waking, Jane had to struggle to remember the rapidly disintegrating details, clutching at fragments and trying to reconstruct the puzzle of the dream. Miss Cinder Eyes had been there, wearing a tight, red and green striped dress and walking silently through the empty school. Her shadow was too long and thin, trailing behind her and bleeding onto Jane's shoes as she followed. Ants swarmed over the walls in busy, regimented lines and the floor seemed wet, slick with salt water. Jane realized that the girl was crying as she walked, copious tears splashing at her feet and forming puddles on the scuffed green floor. There were more vague, confusing details that did not hang together. Rows of connected wooden chairs like old-fashioned theater seats, lying in splintered piles with crows perched on them, preening on their upturned legs. Rows of blank gray monitors, giving Jane the distinct impression that they had been showing a critically important live image seconds before she turned to look. She remembered a broken ladder and some curious little machine that was made from parts of a dead dog. That counting song was playing over the static of the PA system, and then suddenly it seemed that there was this vast, yawning pit in the center of the third floor hallway, sullen heat radiating up from its unknowable depths. The girl poised on the edge of the hole and Jane called out to her, terrified that she was about to leap. The girl turned to the sound of Jane's voice and her feet stumbled, the raw lip of the pit crumbling and she fell. Jane could not save her and woke with a deep guilty anguish in her rapidly beating heart.

Jane didn't see Rose again until the end of the following day. Jane had lingered talking to Brandon in the hallway about their date later

that night and was drifting along in a hormonal stupor when she spotted Rose, thoughtfully taking a last drag on a cigarette as she left the school grounds. She was dressed in the same ratty skirt as the day before, paired with a different, ink-free shirt that was otherwise identical to its predecessor. Jane waved to her and she waved back, a little more happily than Jane had expected. Taking this as her cue, Jane ran to catch up with her.

"I'm sorry about yesterday," Jane said, indicating the faded pen marks that still marred the irritated skin on the back of Rose's hands.

The girl had obviously scrubbed her skin raw trying to remove the black scribbles. Jane imagined that there were probably more under the new shirt where the permanent ink had soaked through the fabric the day before.

"Why should you be?" Rose checked the marks and shrugged, "You didn't do it."

"I meant I'm sympathetic," Jane said. "Not apologetic."

Rose nodded, dropping the cigarette on the ground and crushed it beneath her foot.

"Where are you from?" Jane asked. "Originally, I mean."

Rose pulled her hands up into the loose sleeves of her shirt and turned away. Silence.

"I'm not from here myself," Jane added. "We just moved down from Seattle."

Rose said nothing and just started walking. "I transferred from Canoga High," she finally said.

"That's not far away at all," Jane said, trotting to keep up with Rose's brisk, determined stride. "Did your parents have to move?"

"Foster parents." Rose said, frowning. "Let's just say I didn't get along in that school, either."

Jane wasn't one to push or ask too many questions. She let Rose keep that information to herself and assumed that she'd had similar trouble to the misadventures of the day before. Trouble had certainly followed Jane no matter where she went, and she had lived in more places than she cared to remember. Rose was so provocative that she had to have encountered even worse situations than Monica's Sharpee attack. Perhaps it was why she had those scars on her face.

"I'm headed over to this coffee shop called Java 6 to meet Lola and Amber," Jane said. "Why don't you join us?" Jane was starting to feel too warm in the afternoon sun. She wondered why Rose wore a long-sleeved shirt. It was thin and cotton, but still. Weird.

"I hate coffee," Rose said, eyeing Jane like she suspected her of ulterior motives.

"Wel..." Jane felt awkward under the girl's intense green scrutiny. She looked down at the toes of her Victorian boots.

"But some company would be nice," Rose said, her gaze softening. "I don't really have any friends."

Jane smiled. "I didn't have any either, until I met Lola."

As they walked the six blocks to the coffee house, Jane told Rose the tale of Amber's abduction and subsequent Patti Hearst-like induction into the ranks of geekdom. Rose listened thoughtfully, occasionally chewing at the ragged skin around the edge of her thumbnail.

"So this Petticoat Mafia," Rose said, "what exactly do you guys do?"

Jane shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. Smash the oligarchy of the popular? Avenge the downtrodden? Destroy the beautiful people?" Jane laughed. "Mostly we just stick together no matter what."

"No matter what, huh?" Rose asked. There was a peculiar edgy glitter in her willow-green eyes that made Jane a little uncomfortable.

"Sure," Jane said. "No matter what."

Rose paused and lit another cigarette, inhaling like it was her last breath. "What do I have to do to be in your gang?" she asked.

Jane had never actually thought about that before. It had just sort of formed organically up until that point.

"Well, nothing really," she said. "Just be picked on, I guess. I think you've more than qualified in that department."

"Does that mean I'm in?" Rose asked as they rounded the corner by Java 6.

"Well obviously Lola and Amber need to approve," Jane said. "But I can't imagine why they wouldn't."

Rose paused before the door to the coffee house and suddenly hugged Jane very hard. Jane raised her arms to return the unexpected embrace, smelling cigarettes and peaches and another odd, sort of tarnished brass tang lurking beneath it all. She patted Rose's back, uncomfortably aware of the other girl's curves against her own.

Rose broke the hug and ditched her cigarette. Together they went inside.

Lola and Amber were already there at the usual table. They waved as Jane and Rose went up to the counter to order.

Mr Backwash, hope renewed by this curvy new addition to their daily coffee klatch, tried the free-scone-and-band-flyer routine on Rose. Rose smirked and ordered a glass of milk.

"Don't bother, slick," Lola said, slinking up behind Rose and taking her arm. "She's mine."

Lola and Jane led Rose back to their table. Rose was frowning tensely into her glass.

"I'm not like that," Rose said. "I don't like girls."

Lola burst out laughing. "Neither do I, silly," Lola said. "But that loser will have a hard-on for a week imagining that we're a couple of lesbos."

A relieved smile spread across her face and Jane realized that she really was quite pretty with the pinched expectation of torment lifted from her wide, pale brow.

"So what's your story?" Lola asked, stealing a piece of Rose's orange cranberry scone.

"Not much to tell, really," Rose replied. "My parents died in an accident when I was seven and I've been bounced around through the foster care system ever since. Some foster families were okay, and some... weren't." She paused and took a sip of milk. "Mostly I just keep to myself."

Lola turned the questions to topics like Rose's taste in movies, books and music, all of which were eclectic beyond belief, but Jane could not bring herself to ask the one thing she really wanted to know. The scars. Where did she get those scars?

"So I guess you're one of us now," Jane said instead.

"To our newest member," Amber said, raising her cup in salute.

Lola grinned, chanting: "One of us, one of us!"

Jane and Amber joined in the chant and Jane was surprised to see a sheen of tears in Rose's willow-green eyes.

NINE

The double date was Lola's idea. She and her latest pet, a punk rock drummer moonlighting as a paramedic, would accompany Jane and Brandon to dinner at their favorite Thai place and then return to Lola's to watch *The Others*, that ghost story with the death portraits that Lola had mentioned that first day they hung out together. Jane would have felt more comfortable going out to a theater or someplace more public to watch a movie with a date, but the current crop of simpering romantic comedies and brain dead, shoot-'em-up action flicks made her mind up for her.

Jane had only ever been on a handful of "study dates" in her entire life and those could barely even be called dates, since the young men involved were often oblivious to her inner romantic turmoil. This would be the first time she was being taken out by an actual suitor who was clearly and unapologetically interested in her. She was terrified.

Sitting in the tub and marinating in hot, lavender-scented bubbles, Jane stewed and fretted. She struggled to shave her legs without too many nicks while obsessing over what to wear. She did not want to give him the wrong idea by wearing something overtly provocative, but at the same time she did want to look her best. As she dried her body, she found herself stealing glances in the steamy mirror. Did he really like her belly? It didn't seem possible. She turned sideways, sucked her belly in and smoothed it down with her hands, then let the air out in a rush. Her belly returned to its normal rounded curve. Well, like it or not, she was still going to wear control-top pantyhose, just to be on the safe side.

She dusted herself with lightly scented powder and brushed out her long black hair till it gleamed. A few drops of bergamote au de cologne beneath each ear and inner wrists and she started to feel almost desirable. Lola had offered to do her makeup so she just washed her face and smoothed on a light moisturizer. At least her skin was good. Lola was plagued by zits but Jane seemed magically

immune. She gave her towel-wrapped self a last critical once-over and then scurried from the bathroom.

Selecting undergarments for this date took on a whole new level of anxious torment. She told herself that it shouldn't matter, since there was no way he would be seeing her smalls anyway. Yet she knew she would not feel right in her normal granny panties and heavy-duty bra. She wanted something that would make her feel special, more fabulous than her mundane, daily self. After rejecting several options, she finally settled on a sculpted black lace push up bra and matching panties that were still full backed (she would never submit to that horrifying and torturous modern atrocity known as the G-string; also known as butt floss) but at least were lightweight and feminine.

She added smoky black pantyhose and a tight, knee-length, black spandex pencil skirt that she had quit wearing because she thought it made her ass look too big. Now, seeing herself with Brandon's eyes, she saw that the skirt just accentuated her curves, rather than disguising them as she usually did. She fussed over a choice of top, tossing away several in frustrated angst before winding up back to the first one she chose; a flattering corset-top of burgundy silk that featured a subtle monochrome floral design. She pulled the laces on the top until her cleavage was nicely plumped and then wound a long strand of Victorian jet beads several times around her neck. Tiny jet drops in her ears and chunky-heeled shoes with a rounded toe and a thick strap around her ankle and she found she was as ready as she'd ever be.

Her mom got all maudlin and teary-eyed when she saw Jane in the hallway on her way out. Jane had tried to sneak out without a sappy 'my little girl's all grown up' encounter, but it seemed as if there would be no avoiding it.

"Sweetheart," her mom said, tucking an errant lock of hair behind Jane's ear. "You look so pretty."

"Thanks, Mom," she said, extricating herself gently from her mother's clutches. "Gotta go."

"Promise me you'll be safe," her mother called out. "Do you need condoms?"

Jane rolled her eyes, mortified. "Mother," she said, hand on the doorknob, "my virginity is not in danger. You know I'm saving myself for a long-term relationship. He's a nice guy and all, but it's just a date. Nothing more."

Her mother shook her head. "I don't know where you get your quaint Victorian morals," she said. "Certainly not from me. Things were different when I was your age."

"Please," Jane said, holding up a palm. "Whatever teenage indiscretions are contained in your personal romantic history, I feel that sort of information should be kept from me."

Her mother smirked. "Well, have fun," she said. "And be home by midnight, Cinderella."

She gave her mom a swift peck on the cheek and headed over to Lola's.

Lola was dressed in a tiny plaid skirt that barely covered her boyish ass, purple fishnet stockings and a long-sleeved, black mesh shirt over a heavily padded purple bra. Purple knee-length Doc Martins and weird, purple plastic wrist-cuffs completed the ensemble. Her purple hair was streaming away from her scalp in stiff, frozen spikes and she had the same purple stuff smeared around both her eyes and across her lips.

Sitting in Lola's makeup chair again, Jane watched with amazement as Lola transformed her face.

"I can't get over your skin," Lola said, holding Jane's chin and turning her face one way and then the other. "You don't even need foundation."

Lola insisted on tweezing away the stray hairs around Jane's thick black eyebrows and then brushed pale, icy frost over her eyelids and up to the brows. She added a deep, ashy purple into the creases where the edge of her eyeballs met the curve of her sockets and applied liquid eyeliner in a flawless black sweep along the lashline of both eyes. A touch of mascara to the outer lashes only and a dark, berry-colored gloss across her lips and she was ready. She put her glasses back on and looked in the mirror, stunned by the way her dark eyes seemed larger and more luminous without looking garish or drag-queen-like. Even behind her glasses, they were arresting and

lovely. She puckered her lips, tasting something faintly fruity and thought suddenly of Brandon, wondering if he would try to kiss her. If she would let him.

A chilling scream shattered her contemplation and she nearly leapt out of her skin,

"Doorbell," Lola said. "You ready, Juliet?"

Lola did not give Jane time to answer, just left her there with her arms wrapped around herself, heart banging like an angry prisoner inside her chest.

It was Brandon. He was immaculately dressed in well-pressed black trousers and a black, short-sleeved button up shirt. It took a moment for her to realize that the white buttons on the shirt were actually tiny skulls.

"Hi," he said and pulled a green paper cone from behind his back, offering it to Jane. Nestled inside were three perfect white cala lilies.

"Thank you," she said, looking down at her shoes. "I better get some water."

Lola grinned and handed her a big, paint splattered mason jar. She turned away and busied herself at the sink, snipping a careful inch off the stems with Lola's pocketknife and setting the graceful blooms in the jar. She loved cala lilies. So elegant and tranquil, and so unlike something a high school boy would choose to give his date. Roses were unimaginative and clichéd and so were the kind of trashy, carnation-heavy mixed bouquets you could get for five bucks at the supermarket, but these three flawless flowers had obviously been thoughtfully selected from an actual florist, each one fresh and perfect. According to the Victorian language of flowers, cala lilies meant "magnificent beauty." As she carried them over to where Lola and Brandon stood laughing (at her? she thought in a sudden foolish panic) she struggled to calm herself and slow the manic Samba beat of her heart.

She set the flowers down on Lola's worktable before her shaking hand caused the water to slop over the lip of the jar. The scream sounded once more and again Jane jumped a little. Brandon grinned and Lola ran to answer the door.

Jane stood beside Brandon, silent and awkward for what felt like for ever. She could smell his various grooming products and the fabric softener in his clothes. He didn't smell overly cologned, just clean and warm with a faint, citrusy undertone, Jane felt sure she was blushing and wondered if she had put on too much perfume. Or maybe not enough.

"You look beautiful," Brandon said quietly.

Before Jane could come up with some clever and self-deprecating reply, Lola returned with her date. His name was Randall and he was still in his paramedic uniform: bulky navy windbreaker and workpants with a light blue shirt featuring the hospital's name on the left breast. He was well over six feet tall and thin as a shiv with cadaverous cheekbones and dyed black hair showing nearly an inch of reddish-blond roots. He must have been at least twenty-five and kissed Lola like he wanted to eat her. She shoved him back, laughing.

"Cool it, Rambo," she said. "We're chaperones tonight, right?"

"Right," Randall said, winking. "Your chariot awaits."

Jane was totally appalled to find an ambulance parked in Lola's driveway. "We're going in that?" she asked, incredulous.

"Sure," Lola said. "That way if you knock Brandon's lights out for putting his hand on your leg, Randall can revive him."

Lola rode shotgun in the front while Jane and Brandon sat together on a narrow vinyl bench in the back, surrounded by creepy and complex medical equipment.

"What if someone gets shot or has a heart attack while you have the ambulance?" Jane asked anxiously.

"Well then it's ride-along city," Randall called from the front, thumbing the siren and scooting through a red light. "Hope you've got a strong stomach."

"What?" Jane clutched involuntarily at Brandon's massive arm as the ambulance swung a hard left. "What does that mean?"

Lola punched Randall in the shoulder. "He's kidding," Lola said. "And he better knock it off if he expects to get any."

"Yes, ma'am," Randall said, pantomiming zipping his lip.

When they pulled into the lot by the Thai restaurant, several of the business owners in the other shops that shared the mini-mall stuck

their heads out of their doorways at the arrival of the ambulance. When the four of them got out and made their way into the Thai place, everyone went back about their business.

Inside the restaurant, Jane started to feel a little more at ease. The conversation flowed and the food was spectacular but she still found herself intensely aware of Brandon's every move beside her. He was a lefty and she was right-handed so there was a fair amount of comedic elbow bumping over the course of the meal and she could feel his thick, muscular thigh brush occasionally against hers beneath the table. He handled chopsticks like a pro and doodled on the paper placemat while he talked. Little skeletons and cala lilies, bats and dice and of course Calavera again, this time fighting a *garuda*-like Thai demon.

In order to avoid Brandon's dark, magnetic gaze, Jane found herself watching his hands. They were thick, scarred and blocky, exceptionally broad across the knuckles and utterly unlike what one would picture as the hands of an artist. Brutish, wrestler's hands, but yet they moved eloquently through the air when he spoke and created such fine, meticulous detail in the curlicues of the Thai demon's wings. Jane forced herself to mentally catalogue his flaws, all the reasons why he wasn't right for her in an attempt to talk herself out of the deep crush that was brewing inexorably inside her. But it was as if her usually dominant mind had been hijacked by the runaway steam engine of her hormone-saturated body.

When the check came, Brandon insisted on paying for everyone, even though Jane knew he was not wealthy.

"Come on," Brandon said to Lola. "I wouldn't have been able to get this beautiful woman to give me the time of day without your help. It's the least I can do."

They left, Brandon gallantly pushing open the smoked glass door for Jane and helping her into the back of the ambulance.

Back at Lola's, Jane and Brandon sat on the battered couch; Brandon sprawled comfortably in the center and Jane with knees primly together, jammed anxiously up against the left arm, making as much space as possible between them. Lola stuck in the DVD and

dimmed the lights, snuggling up with Randall on cushions, on the floor.

The movie was excellent. Beautiful and engrossing, scary without the appalling amount of bloodshed that seemed unavoidable in modern movies. The plot twists were no real surprise to Jane who had read many stories that followed a similar theme, but it was still quite good, so much so that halfway through, she stopped paying attention to Brandon's closeness and Randall and Lola's necking. Brandon, to his credit, was a perfect gentleman. No phony stretching out to sneak an arm around her, no untoward advances of any kind and she found herself relaxing and settling back in to the couch as she watched.

When it was over, Lola stood and stretched up to her tiptoes.

"Right," she said. "You know, suddenly, I'm starting to feel this strange pain, right here." She pressed her fingers into her belly just elow her navel. "My panties feel so tight. Someone call an ambulance, I think I'm gonna faint."

She collapsed into Randall's arms and he tossed her, giggling over his shoulder.

"You're on your own, kiddo," Lola called as Randall carried her off. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

The studio door opened and closed, and Jane and Brandon were alone. Shyness enfolded Jane like claustrophobia and she wrapped her arms across her belly.

"I'd like something to drink," Jane said, just to have something to do. "You want a soda or something?"

"Sure," Brandon said. "That'd be great."

Jane leapt up and nearly ran to the big industrial fridge. Inside were bloody lumps wrapped in cling film and jars with mysterious shapes floating in murky red fluid. A blue china plate held a curious rubber sandwich sprouting slick alien tentacles. A gory and horribly realistic severed poodle head could be seen under a glass cake dome. Jane hastily grabbed two cans of soda without even checking the labels and shut the door.

"Dr Pepper or 7UP?" she asked holding out the two cans to see what she wound up with.

"I'll take the Dr Pepper," he said.

Jane sat back down, holding her soda but not opening it. Brandon took a deep drink from his and then turned to her with a sheepish smile.

"I guess I'm a little nervous," he said. "I haven't been on a date since I moved here, and, well..." He trailed off and looked down at the can in his hand.

"What about...?" Jane picked at the hem of her skirt. "I mean... Well, Amber said..."

"Said what?" he asked.

"That you were with an older woman," Jane blurted before she could stop herself.

He looked at her curiously and then looked away. "That was a long time ago."

"I'm sorry," Jane said, blushing thickly. "I just heard..."

"No, it's okay," he said. "Her name was Lupe. She owned the restaurant I worked in, back in Corpus Christi."

Jane waited silently for him to continue. He took another sip of his soda.

"She was beautiful, voluptuous like you. She loved to eat and she was always cooking, always offering me little tastes of this and that. Her *molé* could make you break down and cry, it was that good. She hooked me like a fish, strung me along for three months, then I found out she was married. I wasn't the first busboy she had her way with and probably wouldn't be the last. I thought I loved her but she was just using me. She broke my heart."

He smiled and shook his head. "I've dated some other girls here and there, but I just never felt right with any of them. I guess I still have a hard time trusting people. Plus my family moves so often, I never have the time to really get to know anybody."

Jane nodded. "Really? Me too," she said. "In the last four years I've lived in Seattle, San Francisco, Minneapolis, Boston, and Atlanta."

Brandon laughed. "Guadalajara, Austin, Corpus Christi, Phoenix, Stockton, and Santa Ynez. I got you beat by one."

"My mom's a database administrator. A computer geek. She keeps on getting transferred and let go but now it looks like she's been

hired on permanently here at this latest company."

"Got any brothers or sisters?"

Jane shook her head. "Just me and her."

"Dad?"

Jane frowned and opened her soda. It spritzed a chilly mist across her fingers. She took a sip.

"He died," she said. "Leukemia. I was eleven."

"I'm sorry," Brandon said.

"What about you?" Jane asked. "Any siblings?"

"Seven sisters," he said. "But they're all married now except for one. My dad dumped my mom when I was just a baby. Left her with eight kids and ran off with a blonde soap opera actress. I was the only man in the house."

"Wow," Jane said. "Eight kids."

"My mom, she's an artist too," Brandon said. "She's got a lot of radical ideas about politics and stuff. She edits this Spanish feminist magazine that tries to help poor Mexican women to take charge of their lives and their reproductive rights. It was hard for me growing up because so many other people were against her and her anti-Catholic ideas. Calavera was my only real friend."

Jane looked up at Brandon again and he was looking right at her. She held his gaze, heart thundering in her chest.

"You're a good listener," Brandon said. "I feel like I can really talk to you. So many of the girls I know are completely shallow and self-centered. They don't really listen to anything you say. They just set their faces in this fake-interested expression and wait for it to be time for them to talk."

"I like to listen," Jane said. "It's a lost art. Only there hasn't been anyone in my life worth listening to in a long time. I didn't have any real friends either, not until I met Lola."

Brandon took Jane's hand, caressing the ridge of her knuckles with his thumb and sending skittering shivers over her skin.

"Thanks for saying yes," he said.

She had no idea what to say to that. In fact, she had no idea of any thing at all anymore. It was as if his touch had short-circuited all

thought processes and her body's mutiny against the stewardship of her brain was finally complete. She leaned in and kissed him.

It was a relatively chaste, closed-mouth kiss that landed slightly toward the left corner of his lips, but she could not believe what she had done. She pulled back and raised her fingers to her lips, smearing her lip-gloss.

"I'm... I'm sorry," she sputtered.

The look in his dark eyes went from surprised to smoldering in a heartbeat. He touched her cheek, hand sliding along her jaw and cupping the back of her neck beneath her hair as he pulled her gently forward until her breasts pressed against his chest. With his other hand, he took her glasses off, set them on the table and kissed her back.

His kiss was decidedly unchaste, mouth soft and slightly open against hers, tongue sliding out to taste her, gently at first, and then with a tightly contained urgency that she found impossible to resist. His hand caressed the curve of her waist and the nape of her neck, and she was appalled to find her hands seeking out the shape of his body, the shifting muscles of his broad back and chest and the softly stubbled curve of his head where it joined his thick neck. His skin was amazingly soft and smooth over the coiled steel of the muscles beneath. She pulled him closer, swiveling her hips involuntarily toward him as she kissed him and he gripped her ass, lifting her until she was half in his lap, straddling one of his thighs with her skirt riding high up on her nylon-clad legs. Her weight rested almost entirely between her legs, pressing her down deliciously against the taut ridge of muscle that ran along the top of his thigh. He pulled her into him, sliding her down the length of his thigh until her own thigh was pressed hard against his crotch.

She could feel his erection straining beneath his trousers. It was the first time she had ever been so close to a man in a state of intense arousal and it both inflamed and terrified her. There it was, undeniable proof of his desire for her. He could have been exaggerating when he claimed to like heavy girls, but he was not lying now. In a way it was intensely flattering, the ultimate compliment, yet this was exactly what she had been determined to

avoid from the onset. Desire did not equal the kind of respect and commitment she longed for in a partner, but it was bewitching nonetheless. Bewitching and frightening. She felt as if she were sliding willy-nilly down some unknowable rabbit hole, with no hope of turning back. He pressed fiercely against her and she felt his full length against her thigh. She remembered the other thing that Amber had said about him and felt a cold thread of panic winding through her desire. She pulled away, awkward and stumbling, and trying to pull down her skirt all at once.

"Brandon, no," she said, struggling to compose herself. "I can't..."

Brandon closed his eyes and nodded, pulling in a deep breath. "Okay," he said.

"I mean, it's not that... I just..."

"Jane," he said softly, taking her hand again. "It's Okay. You don't have to explain."

Jane looked up at him. His eyes were dilated: thin, coffee-colored rings around deep glistening black. He brought her hand to his lips.

"I can wait," he said.

Jane wrapped her arms around herself and looked away, shyness squeezing her in its fist. Her blood still rushed through her veins in a mad hormonal rage and she could feel her heart thudding in her temples and between her legs. She said nothing.

"It's almost midnight," Brandon said. "Why don't you let me take you home?"

"Okay," Jane said, putting her glasses back on her face and smiling crookedly.

"Just give me a minute," he said.

Jane frowned. "What's wrong?" she asked.

"Well," he said, "I can't walk the streets like this. I'll get arrested."

She looked down at the preposterous bulge tenting his trousers and broke out laughing.

"Yeah, right, very funny," he said, but he was laughing too and all of Jane's shyness seemed to melt away in that open, candid moment.

When Brandon felt civilized enough to stand, he escorted Jane home. The walk was cool and calming and cleared Jane's head of the sticky residue of her crazy desire. She wrapped her fingers around

the crook of his elbow as they walked and for the first time in her life, Jane caught a glimpse of what it might be like to be half of a whole, intimately connected to another human being. Then, too soon, they were on the stoop of Jane's house.

"Good night, Jane," he said softly, kissing her again, lightly but lingering

"Good night," she said and slipped inside before she could start kissing him back, falling back into that dangerous rabbit hole.

She peered through the curtains, watching him walk slowly down her driveway. He paused by the mailbox, facing away from her and stood still for a long moment. Then he turned and headed down the street. She wondered suddenly how he would get home. His neighborhood was a good twenty-minute drive away. She had seen buses but had no idea if they ran this late. Amber had said he lived in a bad area and she found herself suddenly anxious for him, wishing she had told him to call her and let her know he was home safe. He had given her his home phone number but she was intimidated by the idea of waking up his revolutionary mother.

As if by maternal telepathy, her own mom chose that moment to appear in the hallway, clad in a frowsy plaid bathrobe and clashing pink slippers.

"Hi honey," she said. "How'd it go?"

"Fine," Jane replied, distracted.

"I was just making some herbal tea," her mother told her. "Want a cup?"

Jane wanted nothing more than to curl up in bed and play the events of the evening over and over in her inner theater, but she saw how eager to talk her mother was. She felt a sudden wave of empathy for her mother's loneliness. When was the last time her mom had a date? If she even *had* one since Jane's father died, Jane had never heard about it. Now Jane had friends and even a possible boyfriend and her mother still only had her. Jane realized how selfish she had been, always complaining of how hard the constant moving was on her. She had never thought of how it might be for her mother.

"Okay, sure," Jane said, smiling, and followed her mom into the kitchen.

TEN

In the days after her date with Brandon, Jane found it difficult to think of anything else. She struggled to concentrate in class and had to force herself not to stalk him through the hallways. She sat with him at lunch and let him walk her home each day, but was determined not to make too big a deal over it. It was very hard. Every time she saw him, this profound unconscious muscle memory of his body against hers would steal over her and make her giddy and breathless. But despite her obvious crush on him, he did not push her, did not take their intimacy of the previous weekend as *carte blanche* to paw her at will. He was a perfect gentleman, holding her hand as they walked and kissing her gently goodbye, but she could feel his restraint, the subjugated desire in his body language and it made her want him even more.

Amber teased her mercilessly about it. As they sat at Lola's worktable and battled their way through geometry, Amber grilled Jane for details of the date.

"Well?" Amber asked, eyebrows raised questioningly.

"Well what?" Jane asked, exasperated.

"What was it, eight inches? Nine?"

"I have no idea," Jane said, rolling her eyes.

"Double digits?"

Lola looked up from the little female demon she was sculpting and whistled. She reached into her pocket and took out a measuring tape, pulling the orange tape out twelve inches and holding it up as a visual aid. Rose sat curled up on the sofa, reading JT LeRoy's *Sarah*. She looked up but said nothing.

"I didn't measure," Jane replied dismissively.

"But you felt it," Amber said. "Come on, give us an estimate."

"Look, I said I don't know. Unlike you two, I don't have a vast mental catalog of previous penises against which to compare him."

"Ooooooh," Lola said. "Ouch."

"But it was big, right?" Amber persisted.

"Yes, fine, okay. It was big." Jane could feel a thick blush creeping up her neck and across her cheeks, remembering. "Now can we please get back to numbers that matter? You need to calculate the diameter of this circle."

"What about the diameter?" Lola asked. "Was it thick too, or just long?"

"I have had it with you two perverts," Jane said, shutting the geometry book with a snap. "I'm out of here."

"Why don't you just leave her alone?" Rose said, looking up over the top of her book.

"Come on Jane," Amber said. "We're just playing with you."

"Lighten up," Lola said. She left the clay demon and came over to stand beside Jane. "You really like him, huh?"

Jane looked at her friends and then at her shoes, a smile creeping across her face. She nodded.

The next day, Brandon asked her if she would go out with him again the following weekend, but she had already made plans. She, Lola, Amber and Rose were having the very first Petticoat Mafia sleepover and Geek Fatale movie marathon at Lola's.

"What about the next weekend after that?" Jane asked as she and Brandon rounded the corner of her street.

"Well," Brandon said, "Connor's having a huge party at his place that Friday night. If we win that day, I kinda have to at least make an appearance. How about Saturday?"

Jane nodded, lingering longer than usual in his arms before letting him go.

When the day of the sleepover came, Jane packed up her nightgown, pillow, down comforter and toothbrush along with a rented DVD of *Carrie*, her own contribution to the Geek Fatale movie marathon. It had taken a lot of thought and research on the net to find an appropriate film about misfit girls seeking revenge. She had seen so few modern movies that she was afraid she would end up having to pick something she hadn't seen, based on reviews and synopses. She was happy to find that they had made a film of Stephen King's *Carrie*, a novel that she had actually read and rather enjoyed.

Her mother was almost as excited about the sleepover as she had been about Jane's date. She was thrilled to see her daughter finally doing all the social teenage things that she had missed out on for so long.

Jane was the first to arrive at Lola's. She helped Lola move the sofa and unroll the big, tacky red and green carpet remnant that she had picked up for a song at a nearby Armenian outlet. The ugly but soft carpet made a nice cushy area in the middle of the cement floor where the girls could set down their bedding. They made a supermarket run to load up on snacks and drinks: popcorn, Red Vines, chips and chocolate plus several two-liter bottles of soda. When they returned, they saw Amber pulling up in her cute little silver Mini. The car was under a year old but already had quite a few dings and scrapes, no doubt inflicted during Amber's drinking days. While they were helping Amber to get her stuff out the back, Rose arrived on foot. She had a military backpack and bedroll slung across her back and was dressed in another of her curiously wrong outfits; this time awful purple corduroy pants and an oversized black sweatshirt.

The girls went inside and locked the door.

"Geek girls are go!" Lola said, and they all echoed her, curling their fists like Gs and touching them together.

They changed into their pajamas and Jane marveled at how the girl's choices in sleepwear reflected their wildly diverse personalities. Jane, of course, was in her usual flowing white nightie. Lola wore men's boxers that said, "Who's Your Daddy?" on the crotch and a Dead Kennedys T-shirt. Amber was clad in slinky, red satin camisole pajamas from Victoria's Secret, looking like she just stepped right out of the catalog. And then there was Rose out in left field again in her weird, long-sleeved pink flannel nightshirt with little teddy bears hugging each other all over it, like something a six year-old would choose. Its childish cut seemed particularly wrong stretched over Rose's lush, hourglass figure.

They settled in and started up the DVD player, doling out snacks and drinks. Jane's film was first, followed by Amber's *Ginger Snaps*

and Lola's *May*. When it came time for Rose's film, Lola whistled appreciatively at her choice.

"Well," Lola said, turning the DVD case over, "here's a feel-good family film. Jane, you're gonna love this one."

It was French, the title something Jane didn't recognize.

Baise-Moi.

"*Moi*" of course meant "me," but Jane had no idea what Baise meant. She figured it must be some kind of slang. Lola put the disk in and hit play. The movie was very amateurish-looking, shot on video, but Jane was enjoying comparing the subtitles to what she was able to understand of the dialog as the story unfolded, following two young women and their rather depressing lives. Then as one of the women and her friend were drinking beer and talking on a hill, a group of men showed up and the film took a totally horrifying and unwatchably awful turn.

The men raped the two girls. Jane was sickened and appalled to see that actual penetration was shown as the man repeatedly punched the women in the face. Jane could not bear to watch the monstrously realistic scene. She felt physically sickened.

"Can we shut this off?" Jane asked, hand shielding her eyes from the seemingly endless torture on the screen.

"No, wait," Rose said softly. "It's brilliant, just watch."

Not wanting to seem weak in front of her friends, Jane swallowed her nausea and continued to watch. Rose was right, it was brutally harsh but truly brilliant in its unflinching honesty. As the two girls spun out on their lunatic killing spree, the underlying feminist message became clear, but the explicit sex and grueling, hyper-realistic violence was still very difficult for Jane to stomach. She was intensely relieved when it was over.

Lola put in the bonus feature, a campy trifle called *The Violent Years* to cleanse their palates, and as the girls laughed and joked through the ridiculously contrived story of an Angora-mad high school girl gang on a kill crazy rampage, Jane started to feel the effects of that awful movie sluicing away.

"You know, we should go on a kill-crazy rampage," Lola said. "Rob banks, rape men, blow up the school."

"Hell yeah," Amber said. "That place could use a good apocalypse."

Jane remembered the party where they'd kidnapped Amber and how she had wanted to poison everyone there.

"We could poison the lunchroom macaroni and cheese," she suggested.

"Nah," Lola said. "Nobody eats the macaroni and cheese."

"How about the drinking fountains?" Jane said.

"Please," Amber said in her best stuck-up voice. "Only geeks drink out of the fountains. If you can't afford Evian you might as well kill yourself."

"A gas that is harmless until mixed with hair bleach?" Jane proposed.

"Hey!" Amber said. "No fair."

"I bleach my hair too," Lola said. "Before the Manic Panic."

"Me too," said Rose, munching on a Red Vine that was the exact same color as her hair.

"All right, all right," Jane laughed, holding up her palms in surrender.

"We need a bomb," Lola said. "A smart bomb we could program to seek out only certain clothing labels. The Gap. Old Navy."

"Tommy Hilfiger," Amber suggested. "Ralph Lauren."

"That's it," Jane said.

"Why be so picky?" Rose asked. "Everyone in that place deserves to die."

Jane was surprised at the bitterness in Rose's voice.

"Well, not everyone," Jane said.

"Not Brandon Ortiz," Amber said and Jane mock-punched her in the arm.

"Look," Rose said, "all human beings are petty, selfish and cruel. Some of them can put on a pretty face and trick you into thinking they care, but they only want to tear you down and eat you alive." She reached to take another piece of red licorice and her sleeve rode up on her wrist, revealing thick, crisscrossing scars. "I've been through nine foster homes and twelve schools in the last ten years. I'm here to tell you, everybody sucks."

"Everybody?" Jane frowned. "What about us?"

"Yeah," Lola chimed in. "What are we, chopped liver?"

Rose bowed her head. "You guys are seriously the first and only friends I've had since..." She paused, looking away. "Well in a long time."

"Well, you know we geek girls have to stick together," Jane said.

Rose smiled and made Gs with her fists. "Tell you what," she said, "If you guys are serious about revenge, I have an idea to really get back at all the stuck-up popular bitches and brain dead jocks that ever fucked with us."

"Oh yeah?" Lola asked.

"Do tell," Amber said.

"Have you guys ever heard of the legend of Freddy Krueger?" Rose asked, her willow-green cat eyes narrow and intense.

Jane frowned and shook her head.

"Fred Krueger? The child killer?" Lola nodded. "Sure. He lived in a town called Springwood. Practically a hometown boy. He murdered a bunch of kids and then got off on a technicality. The parents hunted him down and burned him alive."

Jane shuddered.

"He was America's most prolific serial murderer of victims under the age of twelve," Lola continued. "And he especially liked little girls. His stats have been variously claimed as anywhere from six to nineteen or more. The real number died with him so the truth may never be known."

"There's more than that," Rose said. "Lots more."

Lola raised her eyebrows. "Oh yeah?"

"I've been doing research for years," Rose said. "Digging up everything I could find. It was very difficult because many of the records surrounding his death and several subsequent linked events have been deliberately destroyed."

Lola muted the TV and they all listened intently.

"See, his physical death was just the beginning. He has the power to enter your dreams, and if he kills you in your dream..." Rose drew her thumb across her long white neck. "You are history."

"Bullshit," Lola said.

Rose shook her head. "It's true. It all started with several teenagers whose parents helped to burn Freddy. He murdered all but one, a girl who went mad after her boyfriend was butchered in his sleep."

"He gets into your dreams?" Jane asked, skeptical.

Rose nodded. "His physical death made him more powerful and more evil than he ever was in life," she said. "He's been defeated but never destroyed. When he was alive he was just a man, but now he is a force of nature. And I know how to control him."

Lola, Jane and Amber exchanged a look.

"O-kay," Lola said slowly. "Shoot."

"He designed this jointed, bladed glove that he used to kill his victims," Rose said, holding one hand up beside her scarred cheek and splaying her fingers dramatically. "Machined every piece by hand. After he was killed, one of the parents kept the glove hidden in her basement. When her daughter found it, Freddy was able to reclaim the glove and it became a dream object, existing simultaneously in both the real world and in the dream world. I know where to find the glove, in the one place where the membrane between the worlds is thinnest."

She paused dramatically, green eyes flashing.

"The place where the agony and screams of his victims still resonate," she continued. "The place where the glove was created. The basement boiler room in the old factory where he did his killing."

"What are you saying?" Jane asked.

"I'm saying that if we find the glove, we can control him," Rose replied. "Make him our own personal assassin."

"Wow," Lola said.

"You've got to be kidding," Amber said.

"We could wipe out the entire school if we wanted," Rose said. "Kill everyone in a single nightmare. No one could stop us."

"Listen," Jane said, frowning, "even if this guy and his magic glove do exist, we don't really want to hurt anyone do we? I mean, revenge is one thing, but murder?"

"That's a little extreme, don't you think?" Amber asked.

"Extreme times call for extreme measures," Rose said. "If that bitch Shayne found a way to kill her enemies and get away scott free, how long do you think you'd be breathing, Amber?"

Amber frowned.

"This is a dog eat dog world. You have to get them before they get you." Rose turned away, rummaging through her knapsack for a little black zippered case. "I need to pee. I'll be back."

"Freddy Krueger, huh?" Lola said after Rose was gone.

"She is quite a piece of work," Amber said. "I guess it's about what ever you need to believe to get you through the night."

"Do you believe all that about Freddy being able to get into people's dreams?" Jane asked.

Lola shrugged.

"Sounds like one of Lola's movies," Amber said.

That silly little counting song from her dream echoed hollowly in her mind. One, two, Freddy's coming for you... Freddy? Could it be the same man? Surely not. Freddy was not an uncommon name. Jane must have heard the jump rope song somewhere and subconsciously absorbed it without realizing. It couldn't have anything to do with Rose's dream killer.

When Rose returned, her cheeks were flushed and Jane noticed a small but spreading crimson stain on Rose's sleeve, just above the left wrist. For a moment, she thought of mentioning it, but then remembered the strange intensity in Rose's eyes as she talked of Freddy and said nothing.

The rest of the sleepover was fun and forgettable. The girls dished on boys and got jacked up on sugar and tried on Lola's monster masks. Lola videotaped them all menacing the camera. Amber wore a snarling Werewolf head and growled at the lens. Jane wore a toothy demon mask, holding the prop machete and chanted, "Kill, kill, kill, kill, kill." Rose picked a weird sort of bulbous alien head with glittering, insectoid eyes.

"Eat my death ray, puny humans," she said, holding up an orange plastic ray gun that shot sparks.

The girls collapsed into giggles and Lola set the camera aside.

Even bedded down in their respective bedrolls, they still could not stop joking and giggling. Jane, giddy with senseless laughter, wrapped her arms around her aching belly and felt happier than she had in years. It felt so good to be among friends. People with whom she could laugh at the horrors of daily teenage existence. People like her. When she finally drifted off, she did not dream.

ELEVEN

Lola and Jane dragged the reluctant Rose to Brandon's wrestling meet on the following Friday. She sat slightly apart, silent except for the occasional scathing comment. She had on yet another baffling ensemble, this one consisting of a too-tight black turtleneck that made her look like full figured gal Jane Russell in mint condition, inexplicably paired with a frumpy, knee-length, A-line skirt made of scratchy tan wool and those same weird silver flats. Her hair was scraped back into two little uneven pigtails and she wore huge, totally black sunglasses, slouching sullenly and compulsively clicking her ballpoint pen, complaining that she was not allowed to smoke. Jane thought of that killer, Freddy Krueger, and Rose's bizarre tale of dreams and death. It was so beyond the realm of the possible, yet Jane couldn't seem to banish it from her mind. Until Brandon came out to wrestle and she was able to lose herself in happier thoughts.

Connor was next, being bigger than Brandon and in the next weight class up. He fought with a kind of humorless and dead-eyed determination that chilled Jane to watch. He defeated his opponent once again in under a minute. She wondered if Shayne was thin enough to have sex with him yet.

As they stood to greet the victorious heroes, Jane noticed that Rose had been unconsciously digging the nib of the pen into the meat of her hand, just beneath the thumb. A thin trickle of blood dripped from her green sparkle thumbnail and onto the gymnasium floor. Her face was expressionless; green eyes hidden behind the big, insectoid shades.

Then Brandon pulled Jane into a sweaty embrace and she laughed, pushing him away.

"Tarzan miss Jane," he said, pulling her back to him. "Are we still on for tomorrow night?"

Jane nodded, feeling suddenly tongue-tied by his closeness and the smell of his exertion. She rested her cheek briefly against his shoulder, but when she turned her head, she saw something truly odd.

Rose was talking to Connor. It was only for a second before she turned her back on him, digging in her purse for her cigarette case, but it still seemed very peculiar to Jane.

"I'm dying for a smoke," Rose said to Jane, sliding an unlit cigarette between her shiny red lips. "Take a walk with me?"

Jane looked up at Brandon. He smiled and kissed her forehead.

"Go," he said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Jane and Rose walked around to the back of the school.

"What did Connor say to you?" Jane asked while Rose smoked intently beside her.

"He invited me to some kind of party tonight," Rose made a thick, sarcastic sound in her throat. "Can you believe it?"

"Brandon told me about that party," Jane said. "Some jock thing. Sounds like a thrill a minute. You're not going are you?"

Rose smirked and took a deep drag off her cigarette. "Might be entertaining," she said. "In a Wild Kingdom sort of way. Wanna come?"

Jane thought of the awful party from which they had snatched the drunken Amber. She shook her head. "I'd rather eat a bug," Jane replied. "Anyway, I promised Amber I'd study with her and then we're spending the night at Lola's. Come by after if you do decide to go, though I can't imagine why you'd want to."

"I don't know," Rose said, tossing her cigarette and immediately lighting up another. "He's kinda cute."

"Connor?" Jane frowned. "Sure, if you don't mind the lack of higher cerebral function."

"They're all stupid," Rose said, exhaling through the corner of her mouth. "What's the difference?"

"You know he has a girlfriend," Jane said. She couldn't believe Rose was even considering this. "Our pal Shayne Donovan."

"I know," Rose said, an evil little smile spreading across her lips. "I hear she's been slacking off on her girlfriendly duties." She took a drag on her cigarette, exhaled and shrugged. "You snooze you lose."

Jane looked away. Well, if Rose wanted to get a thrill from sleeping with the enemy, who was Jane to interfere? She was a big girl after all.

"Well, have fun," Jane said. "Maybe we'll see you after."
Rose nodded. "You bet," she said.

When Rose came by Lola's after the party, everything changed. It was nearly two am. The girls were still up, watching *Satan in High Heels* and speculating about Rose's interest in Connor when there was a feeble scratching on the door, followed by the screaming doorbell.

When Lola opened the door, Rose fell into her arms. She had no shoes on and her bare feet were scraped and raw. She was actually wearing a nice dress, or it had been nice before it was torn and splattered with beer and other less savory things.

"Holy shit!" Lola cried, wrapping her arms around Rose and helping her to the sofa. "What the hell happened to you?"

Rose was sobbing uncontrollably, knees drawn up to her chest and refusing to speak. Jane ran to get her a bottle of water while Amber wrapped a blanket around her shaking shoulders.

Rose drank in silence for several seconds before speaking. "It was Connor and his fuckhead wrestler buddies," she spat. "Guess they have a share and share alike policy on that team."

"What?" Jane frowned.

"I thought he liked me," Rose said, tears spilling from her electric green eyes. "He said I was pretty."

Amber put her arm around Rose and hushed her like a child. "Just start at the beginning," Amber said softly.

"Connor invited me to that stupid party and I thought it would be a lark to have a little fun with a dumb jock and maybe piss off Shayne Donovan while I was at it. He was super nice to me all night, all full of compliments and everything. We started making out and he asked me to go with him into one of the back bedrooms. When I saw all the other guys there, I tried to run, but they held me down."

"Who...?" Jane asked, slick nausea filling her throat. "Rose, who did this to you?"

"I don't know all their names."

Rose glanced up at Jane and then looked away too quickly. Jane grabbed her arm much harder than she meant to. "Rose," Jane said, "you have to tell me. Was Brandon there?"

Rose said nothing, tears spilling down her cheeks and Jane felt as if she had been kicked in the stomach.

"Oh shit," Lola said, putting a hand on Jane's arm. Jane shrugged her off and stood, numb and sick.

"Rose," Amber said, "we have to call the police."

Rose shook her head violently. "No," she said. "No police. It will be their word against mine and no one will believe me." She wrapped her arms around herself. "It's happened before. No one ever believes me."

"Then let's go kill the fuckers," Lola said, vehemently.

Rose laughed bitterly. "Are you gonna fight Connor Hall and the whole fucking wrestling team? Personally, I don't advise it and trust me, I ought to know."

"We have to do something," Lola said. "They can't just get away with this."

There was a long moment of silence. Jane's nausea swelled, crushing her with a poisonous fury. How could he? She had let herself be charmed by Brandon and even thought she knew him, but she was horrified to think that he was capable of participating in something so despicable. Trust shattered, she was too profoundly hurt to even cry.

"There's only one person who can help us," Rose said.

"Not your killer dream guy?" Amber asked. "Get real."

"I can't do it alone," Rose said. "I need your help."

"You can't be serious," Amber said.

"You really think we could control him?" Lola asked.

"I know we can," Rose said. "It's the only way."

"Jane?" Lola asked.

The three girls turned to Jane. Jane said nothing. She pulled her little cell phone from her bag and went outside.

Standing in the driveway, Jane dialed Brandon's number with shaking fingers. It rang several times and then a sleepy woman's voice answered.

"*Bueno?*"

"I'm sorry," Jane said, barely able to force out the words. "Is... is Brandon there?"

"Not yet," the woman said with a thick accent. Then a pause. "No wait, he is coming."

An eternity of muffled Spanish on the other end of the line and finally, Brandon's voice.

"Hi, beautiful," he said. "I was just thinking about you." His voice was slightly slurred, accent thicker than usual.

"Have you been drinking?" Jane asked, cold fury in her belly and clogging her throat

"I had a few beers, why?" he asked. "I didn't drive."

"Rose is here," Jane said.

"So?" Brandon paused. "What's wrong? Are you okay?"

"No, I am decidedly not okay," Jane replied. "Tell me what happened to Rose at that party."

There was a long silence on the line, then a soft exhale. "What did she tell you?"

"Never mind that," Jane said. "Tell me what happened."

"Connor and some of the guys had a little fun with her, that's all."

Jane was shaking, almost unable to speak.

"A little fun?"

"What can I say?" Brandon replied. "Some girls are into that sort of thing."

"Did you have fun?" Jane asked.

Suddenly his voice sounded much more focused and sober. "Jane," he said. "You're not serious? What did she tell you?"

"Why do you keep asking me what she said?" Jane felt hysterical tears getting closer and closer to the surface. "Why don't you just tell me the truth?"

"I *am* telling you the truth. Rose came to the party and told Connor she wanted to have a gang bang with him and some other guys on the team."

"Gang bang?" She repeated the horrible phrase in a choked whisper.

"They went around together, asking guys to participate. She kept pulling down her top and showing off her tits. They asked me, but I said no. Jane, I said NO. Then she went in the back room with Connor. Dave Carslip, Dave Worthy, Kevin Park and Rich Tremont went with them. That was the last I saw of her."

"She said they made her do it." Now the tears started. "She said you were there."

"What?" A cold silence on the line. "Jane, come on, you gotta believe me. I would never do anything like that."

"Her dress is all torn," Jane said. "She's crying. Are you calling her a liar?"

"Jane," he said, "you don't really believe I would do something like that, do you? My mother would have my cojones if I ever did anything to hurt a woman. You know I would never do that." He paused. "Look, I know she's your friend and all, but there is something not right about that girl. All those scars. I'm serious, I think she's really messed up."

Jane hung up. She could not stand to hear his voice. How could he try to make it sound like Rose was crazy, like she asked for it? Jane's feeling of betrayal was profound and suffocating.

The little phone sounded its cheerful ring, helpfully displaying Brandon's phone number. She hit the power button and turned the phone off.

When she went back inside, the others were waiting.

"Jane," Lola said. "Are you okay?"

Jane shook her head. "Rose," she said. "Tell me the truth. Did Brandon help do this to you?"

Rose looked away and nodded.

"He says you wanted it, that it was your idea but that he didn't participate."

She turned back, furious green eyes flashing. "I asked for it?" she spat. "I fucking asked for it? Dirty little slut that I am, I obviously wanted six guys to hold me down and jack off in my face. In fact, I just can't get enough. Story of my fucking life. I guess I wanted my dad to fuck me when I was six years-old too, huh?"

Shocked silence and Rose pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders.

"And you're sure Brandon was there?" Jane could not let it go. "Rose, I have to know."

Rose looked up at Jane, cat eyes burning. "It wasn't Connor's puny little *pito* that made me bleed."

Jane barely made it out the door before vomiting into the bushes lining the driveway.

Rose came out, still wrapped in the blanket, and put her arm around Jane. "I'm so sorry, Jane," Rose said. "I didn't want to tell you, but it's better that you know what kind of guy he really is. How they all are. This is a shitty world we live in and everyone wants nothing more than to open you up like an oyster and eat all the good stuff, leaving you with nothing."

Jane wiped her chin on the back of her hand and looked up at Rose. "You really think this whole Freddy thing will work?"

Rose nodded. "I'm sure of it."

Lola and Amber appeared in the doorway. Jane looked at the faces of her friends, her only friends.

"Fuck it," she said. "Let's do it."

TWELVE

Jane, Lola, Amber and Rose sat in Lola's van, wrapped in a kind of hot, furious hush as they sped along the dark freeway. Jane and Lola wore the black fatigues they had used for the torture video. Amber had put together an all-black outfit that made her look like either a survivalist dominatrix or a member the Playboy SWAT team. Rose was in her usual, subtly unflattering and unfashionable get-up, only this time the ill-fitting workpants and weird, scratchy, discount-bin sweater were both black. They didn't speak.

Of course, Brandon had tried to talk to Jane, calling her cell phone over and over and even coming over to try and see her, but she froze him out, unable to stand even the sound of his voice. Her mother was baffled by her daughter's fury and Jane refused to explain her actions. Let her mother assume it was some run-of-the-mill teenage drama. It was safer for her.

Getting out of the house had been depressingly easy. She had simply told her mother she was spending the night at Lola's again. Her mom did not mention the canceled date with Brandon, just kissed Jane and gave her that same, I'm-here-if-you-need-to-talk look. It never ceased to amaze Jane how clueless adults could be.

Lola drove and Rose sat shotgun, a map open in her lap. The nearby town of Springwood was about thirty-five miles to the north and its downscale industrial neighborhood was ridiculously easy to find, encrusting the edges of the freeway like a cancer. Somehow, Jane had imagined that the legendary factory that had once served as a child killer's playground would be out in the middle of nowhere, miles away from anything. Amazingly, it was just off the freeway exit ramp, looming sullenly on a wide, weedy lot next to a Korean toy warehouse. Talk about ironic.

Lola parked the wheezing minivan at the dead end of the street, beneath a dirty yellow sign that read: "NO OUTLET." Jane hugged herself as she watched Lola silently pop the hatchback and extract her sleeping bag and the black duffle filled with tools. They had prepared for stealth but the neighborhood was as utterly deserted as

a set for some bad mid-eighties, after-the-bomb movie. No other cars, no stray cats, no rats, not even a cockroach. On the far side of the factory, cars flew past, unseeing and oblivious on the freeway, their occupants concentrating on getting anywhere but here. The girls could have been in sequined bikinis carrying boom boxes and no one would have noticed.

Lola strolled up to the factory gate and used a bulky set of bolt cutters to casually snip the rusted chain. The clatter as the chain fell to the concrete made them all jump, but nothing happened. Lola tossed the cutter back in the duffle and hefted her sleeping bag on her shoulder.

"Well," she said, "let's do this."

"Right," Rose said, grabbing her own pack from the trunk.

Amber and Jane followed suit and the four girls slipped together through the gate and into the lot.

The old brick building had clearly been abandoned for years. A once-jaunty sign featuring a happy rabbit in oversized work gloves and goggles proclaimed: "Ralco, leader in..."

Whatever 'Ralco had once been a leader in' had since faded to illegibility. Beneath that was a dusty yellow banner reading, 'Industrial Property for Sale—Will Build to Suit!' A telephone number was also advertised. It looked like it had been there for ages with no takers. Many of the panes in the huge windows had been smashed and a few brave kids had hastily tagged the building's dirty brick skin, but there was no other sign of human presence. The place seemed leaden with the horror of what its walls had witnessed.

Jane could not believe that less than three short blocks from where they stood was the mundane, suburban American landscape of strip malls, franchise restaurants and gas stations. People sat at that very moment, stuffing fries into their faces and worrying about missing the line up on their favorite network, as unaware of what was happening here as they had been years ago, when the child killer named Freddy Krueger had his way with Springwood's innocents.

But as creepy and morbid as it was to revisit the place where a famous murderer had committed his crimes, Jane still found it next to impossible to believe Rose's claim that Freddy Krueger had

achieved some kind of immortality in the nebulous realm of dreams. That he could be resurrected and used against their enemies. It was the stuff of one of Lola's beloved horror movies, a hasty excuse of a plot to allow for maximum on-screen blood and gore.

Jane only hoped that somehow, this pilgrimage would help Rose to deal with her anger and shame and allow her to move on. Jane herself had no idea if she would ever get over the pain of trusting Brandon and having that trust so brutally betrayed. Yet in a horrible way, that betrayal made an awful kind of sense to Jane. The idea that Brandon was a worthless, lying son of a bitch just like all the other boys made far more sense than the unrealistic fantasy that he was really different and special. She never should have allowed herself to buy into that foolish pop-song-sappy dream of puppy love. What the hell had she been thinking? She clearly wasn't, which was the reason she had fallen for his deceitful charm. She let her body override her mind, something that she would never let happen again. Jane ached with bitter fury for allowing herself to be duped by a jock.

They found several huge loading bays with giant roll-up metal doors so corroded they looked as if they would never open again, but it took some doing to locate a human-sized entrance. When they found it, they didn't even need the bolt cutters. The chain that had once bound the doors together had rusted away and now dangled as uselessly as Christmas tinsel. For a long minute they all just stood there, wordless and unsure. Then Rose reached out, yanked off the remains of the chain and pulled the door open, clicking on her flashlight.

The oppressive, dusty emptiness of the abandoned factory dwarfed the feeble beams of their flashlights as they entered and stood huddled together in the doorway. To their left was a rickety little stairway that lead up to a door in an odd, square room that stuck out like an isolated box high up near the ceiling. The main space of the factory floor was jammed with unfathomable dead machines, their original purpose impossible to guess. The spaces between them were laced with rusted and unsafe-looking catwalks. On the wall beside the stairway was that same cheerful goggled bunny from the sign outside flashing a bucktoothed grin and giving the thumbs up.

Beneath him in orange block letters, "Raleigh the Rabbit says—SAFETY FIRST!"

"Which way?" Lola asked.

Rose shone the beam of her flashlight across the faces of the dead machines. "We need to find the basement," she said. "The boiler room."

The thought of descending into the lightless basement of this grim and hostile old building filled Jane with jagged apprehension. She was beginning to wonder if this was such a good idea. Fantasy dream demons aside, who knew what kind of crackheads or homeless weirdos might be lurking in the bowels of this miserable, forsaken place. But in spite of herself, she swallowed her misgivings and followed Rose.

They walked single file, Rose in the lead, followed closely by Jane and Amber, with Lola bringing up the rear. They stayed in a tight little pack, creeping along inside the protective halo formed by their pathetic yellow circle of light. They passed huge vats, broken hand trucks and empty crates but found no way down. Following the walls, they covered the perimeter and then started working their way between the machines. It was terribly easy to get turned around in the dim, shadowy factory and they were always uncomfortably sure that they were going in circles.

"We should have brought breadcrumbs," Jane said.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" Lola asked.

Rose shot Lola a hostile look and kept on, turning a corner between two massive machines.

The girls grew bitchy and snappish as they circled and circled, finding nothing. Only Rose remained firm, grim and determined as the leader of an Arctic expedition that might not make it back.

"Look," Amber said, "this is bullshit."

"Rose, there's nothing here," Jane said.

Rose drew up suddenly short, initiating a comedic collision as the girls stumbled into each other.

"What now?" Lola asked, irritated.

The beam from Rose's light had pinned something on the floor. Something gray and dusty like a little animal corpse. Jane squinted

at the object and slowly realized what it was. An ancient, leather work glove, flattened and rotten, fingers crumpled.

"You're kidding, right?" Lola came forward and nudged the stiff glove with the tip of her toe. "That's the glove?"

Rose shook her head and made a contemptuous noise of dismissal. "No, stupid," she said. "Look."

Rose squatted down and blew on the floor. A cloud of dust billowed up, revealing a long, dark crack. Rose followed the crack with her fingers as it made a right-angled turn and then another, tracing a square nearly six feet across. A trap door. She pushed the old glove out of the way. Beneath it was a smooth metal ring, folded down flush with the floor.

"Shit," Lola said softly.

Laying her pack on the floor, Rose pried up the big ring and yanked on it. She was able to lift the trap about an inch upward before it slipped out of her grip and slammed, sending up a huge swirling vortex of dust.

Jane sneezed twice in quick succession and Amber waved her hands in front of her face to clear away the cloud.

"C'mon," Rose said, grabbing the ring again. "Help me."

She lifted again, grunting between clenched teeth and Lola knelt down and wedged her hands in the crack, gripping the edge of the trap door. Amber looked at Jane and then crouched beside Lola and grabbed hold of the trap door. Jane watched as the three of them muscled the trap up until it was perpendicular to the floor and then dropped it. It crashed to the ground with a huge, hollow boom that echoed like cannon fire through the factory. Jane shone her light down into the black and gaping throat revealed beneath the trap door. A tomblike stench of mold, age and crumbling brick wafted out of the hole. There were no stairs, just a rickety metal ladder leading straight down. The happy rabbit had been painted on the wall beside the ladder's top rug, reminding them to put safety first. Some long-gone joker had made a few editorial changes. The rabbit was holding a crudely drawn pitchfork and sporting horns between his ears. His message of safety had been crossed out and instead it read: "Raleigh the Rabbit says—ABANDON ALL HOPE, YE WHO ENTER HERE!"

Jane shuddered, skin coursing with involuntary chills. Without hesitation, Rose slid her legs down on the rungs of the ladder and started descending. They watched the joggling beam from her light scribble through the blackness as she went, until she reached the distant bottom. She seemed so small as she shone the light up onto her face and called up, "Toss down the packs!"

The three girls exchanged looks and then Lola shrugged and tossed down Rose's pack, followed by her own. Jane and Amber did the same and then Lola started down the ladder. Amber frowned, clenching her fists and climbed down after Lola.

Standing alone in that dark factory, Jane felt one inch high, a tiny and insignificant Borrower in this vast and sinister place. She wished she could call the girls back up, laugh it off and go back to Lola's. Anything but descend into the cold black hole. Steeling herself, she thought of Brandon and how he had betrayed her. The hurt gave her strength to climb down and join her friends in that creepy, lightless basement.

When she set her foot on the damp concrete at the bottom of the ladder, she felt an icy chill seep into her bones. They were at the dead end of a long corridor that led to a wide archway, and through there, presumably, the boiler room. Puddles of black, slimy water fouled the concrete as they walked, engulfed by the stench of cold rot and secrets. Jane could not even conceive of the terror a small child would have felt, being carried down into this hellish lair. Did he kill them right away, or did he torture them first? The machines would have been alive then, the huge boiler hissing like a dragon. Their cacophony would have easily covered the agonized shrieks of a dying child.

Rose's light found something pale and dirty against the left-hand wall. She nudged it with her toe and it rolled, revealing itself to be a naked, headless baby doll, stiff plastic limbs twisted into an unnatural position. The girls exchanged a silent look and continued on, through the archway and into the massive, cathedral-like space of the cold and disused boiler room.

There was a rickety worktable and a single metal stool off to one side. Rotted coils of rope lay beneath a trio of heavy iron hooks set a

little over four feet up the brick wall, just about the height of a child's hands if they were standing on tip toe and reaching up as high as they could. There were dark stains on the brick and on the cement floor below, forming concentric rings where blood had flowed and dried, flowed and dried. Dominating the center of the room was the boiler itself, crouched like a heathen idol, like a giant mechanical spider beneath a twisting maze of ducts. Its rough, metal hide was mottled with rust and the large square hatch was partially ajar, revealing a thin slice of even blacker darkness.

Rose nearly ran to the boiler and Jane had to bite her tongue not to yell out for her to stay back. Something about that massive boiler struck Jane as particularly sinister. Rose knelt down before it like a suppliant, thrusting her hand into its black and gaping maw. When she turned to her friends, she was holding a dirty gray bundle.

"Is that it?" Lola whispered.

Rose unwrapped the filthy cloth to reveal its contents. It was a blade-tipped glove, just like Rose had described, and Jane realized with a kind of greasy helpless dread that she had actually dreamed that glove. She had seen it, only she couldn't quite remember where. As Rose turned the glove over in her hands, it seemed to warp and shimmer as if its physical boundaries were somehow not quite solid.

One, two, Freddy's coming for you...

Rose's green eyes glowed with the burning fanaticism of a religious zealot. She reverently lifted the glove from its cloth shroud and holding the base of the index finger blade, she sliced deeply into the scarred flesh of her wrist. Her fresh, red blood ran down the length of the blade, soaking into the stiff brown leather.

"Now you," she said, handing the glove to Lola.

"You sure about this?" Lola asked, holding the glove and frowning at Rose.

"Just do it," Rose said. "Use the middle finger."

Lola shrugged, forcing out a laugh. "How appropriate," she said, raising the middle blade on the glove as if it were giving them the bird. "Fuck you, rapist jock fuckheads."

She winced as she drew the blade across her arm, blood flowing and saturating the glove. She shook her hand and clenched it into a

fist, then passed the glove to Amber.

"I don't know," Amber said. "It doesn't look very clean..."

"Don't wimp out on us now, Prom Queen," Lola said.

Amber bit her lip and defiantly sliced into her wrist with the ring finger blade.

"Ow, shit that hurts," she said as her blood dripped down onto the glove. "Your turn, Jane."

Jane reluctantly took the glove, holding it as if it were contaminated. It no longer shimmered and its edges seemed crisper, more defined. This was ridiculous; stupid Ouija Board antics unworthy of a girl of her age and intelligence. Yet she felt a creeping sense of unease, looking around at the flashlight-lit faces of her friends and down at this horribly familiar object. She could put a stop to this right now. She could put her foot down and refuse to participate in this childish charade. But she was far more afraid of appearing uncool in front of her friends so she quickly scratched the tip of the pinkie blade across her wrist. No blood appeared in the red scratch and she had to go over it again, gritting her teeth against the bright pain. Jane had never in her life hurt herself on purpose. The only time she had ever been cut was when she'd accidentally sliced her thumb once while chopping tomatoes for spaghetti sauce nearly nine years ago. She hadn't even needed stitches, just a kiss from her dad and a Band-Aid. That little cut did not prepare her for the burning pain that engulfed her wrist, radiating out from the awkward slice as her blood oozed over her palm, dribbling down onto the glove. A hollow, dizzy chill skittered through her and the next thing she knew, Lola was leaning over her repeating her name as if shouting down an echoing well.

"Jane? Jane? Jane, are you okay?"

"I'm..." Jane shook her head. "I'm fine." She realized she was slumped on the floor, back against the hulking boiler.

"You fainted," Rose said.

"Great," Jane said, pressing her hand to her forehead. Her face was slick with cold sweat. "How embarrassing."

"Don't worry about it," Rose said, turning her back and cradling the glove like it was a wounded bird.

Lola helped Jane lay down her bedroll as Rose made a large, uneven circle around them with her blood on the dirty concrete floor. The other girls arranged their bedding too and Amber pulled out a sleek portable alarm clock.

"Twenty minutes, right?"

Rose joined them and nodded, laying out her own bedroll. "Jane, do you have the pills?" she asked.

Jane nodded and fished in her pocket, extracting a Ziploc baggie containing four white pills. Her mother had these sleeping pills left over from the hellish weeks after her father's death and while she still popped one on occasion, Jane doubted that these four would be missed.

"Ready?" Jane asked.

"Ready," Lola replied.

"Ready," Amber said.

"Right," Rose said, taking one of the pills and popping it into her mouth,

Lola pulled out a bottle of water and passed it around as each girl in turn swallowed a sleeping pill and lay down, tense and silent. Their bedrolls were laid out like compass points, their heads together in the center. Jane closed her eyes, wondering yet again if this was such a good idea. But after all, it was just a dream. How could a dream possibly hurt anyone?

THIRTEEN

The needling electronic sound of the little alarm clock dug its nails into Jane's consciousness and she sat up, groggy and confused. It took several slow seconds of sludgy cognition to remember where she was and why she felt so stiff, uncomfortable and cold.

"Shit," Lola said softly, pulling her sleeping bag up around her head. "I feel like one of the marines at the beginning of *Aliens*."

"What happened?" Amber asked, reaching out to check the alarm clock. "I don't remember dreaming at all."

"Me neither," Jane replied.

Rose sat silent and sullen, arms tightly wrapped around her body.

"Maybe the pills stopped us from dreaming," Jane ventured quietly, putting her glasses back on her face.

"Maybe," Lola said.

"Well," Amber said, "we gave it our best shot, Rose, but I guess it didn't work. Can we get the hell out of here now?"

"Sorry, Rose," Jane said, reaching out to touch Rose's hunched shoulder.

Rose shrugged her off. "Fuck," she said. "I don't understand."

Lola shrugged. "I don't know what to tell you, man," she said. "I will tell you this, though. I'm with Amber. Let's get the fuck out of this hole."

"Come on," Jane said softly, standing and offering her hand to Rose.

Rose scowled at Jane and then relented and took her offered hand. The girls quietly packed their things and slung their bags over their shoulders.

Rose wrapped the bladed glove in its ratty shroud and stuffed it into her pack. She paused in the doorway, shining her flashlight around the cold, dark boiler room for the last time.

"I was so sure..." she whispered.

"I'm sorry," Jane said.

"Me too," Lola said. "Looks like we're just gonna have to kick those fuckers' asses ourselves."

The girls trooped down the stone corridor toward the ladder. The headless doll still lay there, silent and forgotten, just as so much that took place within these walls had been forgotten. Eager Amber took the lead, first to mount the ladder, and she was more than halfway up when a harsh and ominous squeal shattered the silence.

"Shit," Amber said, gripping the rungs of the ladder as the ancient bolts holding it in place began to peel free of the brick.

"Hang on, Amber," Lola shouted.

Amber pressed on, continuing to climb the shuddering, rickety ladder as it shimmied loose and began to slip alarmingly to one side.

"Shit," Amber said again. "Shit, shit, shit!"

Her flashlight slipped from her grip and tumbled to the floor below, shattering at Jane's feet. Amber had one hand over the edge when the ladder fell, crashing to the cement below and smashing into several jagged pieces. Amber was left dangling twenty feet above them, hanging desperately onto the edge of the trap door.

Jane covered her mouth in anxious terror as Amber struggled to pull herself up enough to hook her chin over the edge. There would be no second chance. If she fell the twenty feet to the concrete floor, she would be fatally injured or killed and they would all be trapped in the cellar of an abandoned building with no hope of rescue. No one knew where they were, and no one had any reason to enter the empty factory and discover them by accident. They had only the one bottle of water and no food. Even if they were careful, the batteries in their flashlights would slowly die within the first forty-eight hours and they would be left to starve to death in total darkness, less than three blocks from Taco Bell. Jane's vivid imagination painted horrific images of desperation, blind cannibalism, and slow, creeping madness as Amber slipped, caught herself, and then struggled to pull herself up again.

"Come on, Amber," Jane whispered, staring fixedly at the pale bottoms of Amber's brand new boots as they kicked and flailed through the air above their heads. "Come on come on come on."

Amber was finally able to throw her entire upper body across the factory floor. She lay there, resting for nearly a minute and then slowly pulled her dangling legs up after her. The girls below cheered

in a massive wave of relief. Another long stretch of seconds ticked by before Amber's blonde head appeared, looking down over the edge of the big square hole.

"I'm okay," she called.

"Thank God," Jane said.

"Now what?" Amber asked.

Lola and Rose looked at each other, shrugging.

"She should go get help," Jane said.

"No," Rose said adamantly.

"Why not?" Jane asked.

"We could get in big trouble for being in here, you know," Lola said. "Trespassing. Breaking and entering."

"Damn," Jane said. "Can you call someone to come here and help us? Randall maybe? He'd be up, right?"

Lola pulled her phone from her bag and flipped it open. "No signal," she said. "How about you?"

Jane searched through her pack for her little phone. Nothing. No signal. She shook her head.

"Amber?" Lola called.

"Phone's in my pack," Amber replied.

Lola hunted up Amber's phone. Unsurprisingly, it too had no signal.

"Rose?"

Rose shook her head. "I don't have a phone," she said.

"Great." Lola shook her head.

"Amber could drive to a payphone," Jane suggested.

Lola pulled the keys to the van from her pocket and stood beneath the trap. She threw the keys up toward Amber. They fell short, clattering back down. She tried again and again, and each time they fell short of Amber's reaching fingers.

"Look," Rose said, "I don't see how calling some boy is going to help us anyway."

"He could bring rope," Lola said, trying again to toss the keys up to Amber and failing again.

"Rope?" Jane said, frowning. "Wait a minute. Rose, come with me."

Without thinking twice, she turned and headed back to the boiler room. Rose followed obediently behind, trotting to keep up with Jane's urgent steps. There beneath those three iron hooks, just where Jane remembered them, were several old lengths of rope.

"Do you think it will be enough?" Rose asked.

"It better be," Jane replied, trying not to look too closely at the stiff brown stains on the ancient rope as she gathered the pieces in her arms. "Come on, help me."

Together, Rose and Jane collected every piece of rope they could find, all told about eight pieces varying in length from three to four feet. They brought the rope back to where Lola was waiting beneath the trap door.

"Brilliant," Lola said, as Jane dumped the rope at her feet. "Let's hope it's enough."

She started knotting the pieces together into one long strand. Jane watched apprehensively as Lola carefully coiled it up and threw it with all her might up toward Amber. It did not go even halfway up before fluttering back down like a limp party streamer.

"Fuck," Lola said. "It's too light."

"Why don't you tie something to the end?" Rose suggested.

"Right," Lola said.

She fished in her tool bag for a large pair of pliers. She knotted the rope around the joint of the pliers and started swinging it over her head like a demented cowboy, building up momentum.

"Here it comes," she cried as she let the rope go. The pliers flew straight up, thwacking against the edge of the trap. Amber scrambled and caught them.

"Got 'em," Amber called.

"Yes," Lola hissed.

"All right," Jane said.

"Okay," Amber said. "I'm gonna find something sturdy to tie it too. It's pretty dark up here with no light so this may take a minute."

The three girls waited in anxious silence, training their lights up at the trap while Amber fumbled and shuffled around in the dark above their heads. A shower of thin dust filtered down and then the rope

tumbled over the edge. The frayed end swung about four feet above the cement floor.

Amber's head reappeared in the square trap. "Okay?"

"Okay," Lola replied. "Packs first."

They tied the packs to the end of the rope one by one and Amber hauled them up and over the edge. As Rose's pack was lifted, her little black zippered case slipped out and fell to the ground. Jane bent to retrieve it and hand it to Rose when a shiny antique scalpel tumbled out from the unzipped end.

"Thanks," Rose said quickly, picking up the scalpel and reaching to take the case from Jane's hand.

Jane's eye was drawn to the faded old scars on Rose's wrist beside the bright new one made by the blade of Freddy's glove. She remembered Rose disappearing into the bathroom with that little black case and returning with dots of blood soaking through her sleeves.

Uneasy and unsure of what to say, Jane let Rose take the case. Rose stuck it in her pocket and went to work tying Jane's pack to the rope like it was no big deal.

When all the packs were up, Amber dropped the rope back down and Rose gripped the end, looking doubtfully back at Lola and Jane.

"You can do it," Lola said.

Rose bit her lip and started to climb. As Jane watched her tentative and shaky progress, she wondered if she was going to be able to make it herself. She was struck with a sudden, shameful memory of a time when she had been forced to climb a thick, splintery rope in gym class. The entire class stood gathered around the bottom of the rope, laughing and jeering as she clung for dear life about a third of the way up, unable to go further, but terrified of falling. There was no cushy, navy blue mat at the bottom of this rope either, just unforgiving cement. Jane realized she was holding her breath as Rose neared the top. She let that breath out in a relieved rush as Amber caught Rose by her arm and helped her up and over the edge.

Now two small heads peeped over the side. Rose grinned and gave the okay sign with her fingers.

"You next," Lola said, nodding toward the swinging rope.

"I don't know," Jane said, eyeing the end of the rope where it dangled just below the level of her chin.

"There's nothing to know," Lola said. "Just climb."

Jane reached out and grasped the rope a few feet from the end. She experimentally lifted her feet up off the ground and scootched herself upward. Her arms felt as if they were going to pull free from their sockets as she pulled her weight up a wobbly inch at a time until she was able to grasp the rope between her thighs. She hung there, terrified, squeezing the rope with her legs. She was not even a quarter of the way up and she already felt her grip slipping. A fearful grunt slipped out between her teeth and the rope slid between her hands, burning her palms as she fell, landing hard on her ass.

"Damn it," she said, struggling to her feet.

"You okay?" Lola asked, rushing to help her.

"Fine," Jane said, face hot with embarrassment

Determined not to seem pathetic in front of her friends, she sucked in a deep breath and leapt up, grabbing the rope again. Her arms burned and her shoulders ached as she fought to pull herself up. She could not make it and dropped hopelessly back down again.

"Okay, listen," Lola said. "Here's what we're gonna do." She started unbuttoning her shirt.

"What are you doing?" Jane asked as Lola pulled her shirt off and stood braless and goosebumped in the chilly basement. "Are you crazy?"

"Trust me," Lola said, knotting the long sleeves of her shirt together and tying the end of the rope around the knot.

When she stepped back there was a kind of sling dangling from the end of the rope. "What you're gonna do," Lola said, seeming not to care at all that she was topless in front of everyone. "Is get one foot into that loop and hang on. Then Amber and Rose are going to pull you up."

Jane looked doubtfully at the knotted shirt. "Are you sure?" she asked.

"No," Lola said, grinning. "But we gotta try something."

"Okay then," Jane replied, smiling a little in return, and leapt up to grab the rope again.

After much struggling, Jane was able to get her foot into the loop of Lola's shirt. She squeezed her eyes shut and hung on tight. "Okay!" she shouted. "Ready."

Amber and Rose started hauling her slowly upward. Jane kept her eyes tightly shut, not wanting to see the floor falling away as she rose higher and higher. Then miraculously, she felt hands gripping her and she was yanked up over the edge and pulled into a fierce double embrace.

"You made it," Rose said.

"God damn," Amber whispered.

She let herself be hugged for a few more seconds until Lola's voice called out from down below.

"All right, all right! Forget the lovey-dovey shit and toss that fucking rope back down already. I'm freezing!"

Jane laughed and untangled herself from the rope, lowering it back down over the edge. Lola untied her shirt and put it back before clambering up the rope like a monkey, pulling herself up in record time.

"All right!" Lola said. "Let's get the fuck out of here!"

They shone their flashlights around the silent, hulking machines that surrounded them.

"Which way?" Jane asked.

"Rose?" Amber said.

Rose looked around, frowning. "This way, I think." She indicated a direction with her chin.

"Should we close the trap door?" Amber asked, gazing down into the hole.

"I guess," Lola said. She gripped the edge of it. "Give me a hand."

Together they lifted the heavy door and let it slam down, closing over the black pit and its dark and bloody memories.

They followed Rose's lead for almost ten minutes, taking what seemed like a slightly diagonal but relatively direct route toward the door. They pressed on, passing mysterious machine after machine but somehow, the path they took just kept on going. Their lights could not touch the outer wall of the factory. There were just rows and rows of machines as far as the eye could see.

"Are you sure we are going the right way?" Amber asked.

"Sure, I'm sure," Rose replied.

Another long brace of silent minutes passed uneventfully. Jane's feet were really starting to hurt.

"How can we just keep walking like this?" Lola asked. "We should have hit the wall of the building by now."

"How big is this place?" Amber asked.

"We must be going in circles," Jane said.

"We are not," Rose snapped.

"Well then what the fuck?" Lola asked.

They trooped along in angry silence for several more minutes and then Lola stopped short, hands on hips.

"Look," she said. This is ridiculous. We've been walking for, like, fifteen minutes in pretty close to a straight line but we still haven't hit the wall. If an average person walks four miles an hour..."

"There's no way this building is a mile wide," Jane said, incredulous.

"We just..." Rose wiped the back of her hand across her mouth.

"We just got... turned around somehow."

Jane could see that Rose was close to tears.

"Turned around?" Lola scoffed. "We're fucked is what we are."

"I knew this was a bad idea," Amber said.

"A big fucking waste of time," Lola spat. "We're gonna be here when the fucking sun comes up."

"If the sun comes up," Amber said.

"Fuck you," Rose said, tears spilling over the rims of her willow-green eyes.

"Hey," Jane said. "Enough. We're tired and cranky and we all just want to be home, but there's no reason to start sniping at each other."

"Sorry," Lola said, closing her eyes and running her hands through her purple hair.

"Look," Amber said. "There's the wall."

At the farthest reach of her flashlight beam rose a comfortingly solid wall of brick.

"See," Rose said. "Now all we have to do is follow the wall until we find the door."

"Oh ye of little faith," Jane said laughing.

When they reached the wall they found something profoundly disquieting. The featureless brick was unbroken for as far as the flashlight beam could reach to both the left and right, and more disturbingly, up.

"Where are the windows?" Amber asked.

"I have a really bad feeling about this," Lola said.

"It can't be," Jane whispered. "It's just not possible."

Jane felt chilled and anxious, but Rose was beaming like a bride, ecstatic. "Don't you see?" she enthused, eyes glittering in the meager light. "It isn't possible because it isn't real. We're dreaming now!"

Lola frowned. "Are you sure?" She looked up at the vast, unending wall. "Everything feels so real."

Amber reached over and pinched Lola.

"Ow, bitch!" Lola cried.

"Too real," Amber said.

"This is a dream?" Jane asked incredulously.

Rose nodded. "We have to find Freddy's remains," she said.

"Remains?"

"Not his real bones and stuff," Rose said. "They were destroyed years ago. We need to find his dream remains, the seed from which he can be reborn."

Jane felt any traces of confidence melting away. She found she wanted nothing more than to wake up in her own safe comfortable bed. She'd had it with this foolishness and was more sure now than ever that this was a terrible idea. Her only comfort was the fact that it was just a dream. She'd had plenty of nightmares before, many far worse than this one and as upsetting as they were, nothing ever came of them in the real world.

"Well," Lola said. "Where are these remains? Do we just keep wandering endlessly around this place hoping to stumble across them at random?"

Rose shook her head. "We need to find a door," she said. "A door from this collective dream consciousness and into Freddy's dream."

"Into Freddy's dream?" Jane frowned.

"Whenever he is banished from the real world, he retreats into his own nightmare. A kind of psychic reliquary where his dark essence is trapped until it can be unleashed again."

Jane did not like the sound of that one bit.

"If you say so," Lola said, shining her flashlight across the faces of the machines. "So where is this stupid door?"

"Is that it?" Amber asked quietly.

They all turned to look where she was pointing. There was a tiny, child-sized door set into the rusty flank of a massive steel vat about fifteen feet down the wall from where they stood. The little door was made of cheerful red wood, like something out of a fairy tale of happy gnomes and elves. The girls approached it silently, and Rose reached out to turn the cut glass knob. She pulled the door open and squatted down to look inside.

"Come on!" she said and stepped through the door.

Lola looked back at Amber and Jane and shrugged, then followed Rose. Amber was next and once again, Jane stood alone in the cold dark factory, or its corresponding double inside this unknowable, impossible dream world. She quickly crawled through the little door to join her friends.

On the other side, she found herself standing on a sleepy suburban street. Bland, middle-class houses with well kept lawns and cheerful flowerbeds. The cars parked in driveways and along the street were nice and looked quite new, but all were nearly twenty years old. In front of them was a house not unlike its neighbors: simple, average and unassuming. The only remarkable thing about it, the thing that made it stand out in this nice sleepy neighborhood, was the thick, no-nonsense security bars on every window, including the little rectangular window in the center of the door.

"Nancy's house," Rose whispered reverently.

"Where the hell are we?" Lola asked.

Rose turned to her, eyes burning. "We're on Elm Street," she said.

Together the girls walked up the neat little path to the door of the house. It was not locked.

Inside, it was a completely ordinary suburban house. Clean carpet. Family portraits. Comfortable, lived-in furniture. Nothing sinister at all and yet there was an almost suffocating pall of fear hanging over every room. It made the hairs on the back of Jane's neck prickle as she followed Rose down a long dim hallway to a white cellar door, standing slightly ajar.

Rose did not hesitate to push the door wide and start down the stairs. Jane felt as if she had been following Rose forever, as if she had forgotten how to do anything else. As they headed down the stairs things started to change in a way that was difficult for Jane to put her finger on. The walls seemed deceitful, shimmering and shifting while she wasn't looking. The air itself seemed thick with something that was not quite a sound and not quite a feeling, but something in between, like the crackle of electricity or a noise too deep for human ears. At the bottom of the stairs, they found themselves not in a suburban basement, but in a very long, very thin corridor. The walls were riddled with holes, some dime-sized, some as big as dinner plates. As they walked, Jane's eye was caught by flickering light flashing in the depths of the head-high holes, and she could not resist leaning in to look.

As if peering through a fish-eye peephole in an apartment door, Jane was treated to a view of a dark and unpretentious chapel. A slender nun knelt before the altar, praying out loud in an intense and urgent whisper. There was a naked baby boy laying unattended on the stone floor several feet away, crying weakly, stubby legs kicking.

The next hole revealed what looked like some kind of institutional dormitory filled with row upon row of bunk beds. A thin, geeky blond boy with a spreading red stain on the seat of his light blue pants stood in the middle of a hostile, mocking crowd of identically dressed boys.

"Period! Period! Freddy got a period!" the boys chanted, pointing and laughing at the blond boy.

Jane's heart went out to the little boy in his abject shame and humiliation. He was clearly the victim of some horrific abuse. Where were the adults? Why didn't they do something? Then it occurred to Jane that the adults in question might be responsible for the boy's

condition and she felt a profound stab of empathy that was almost physical in its intensity. This geeky little boy was just like them. Like Lola locked in the art supply closet. Like Amber, held down and drenched with gin. Like Rose, scribbled on with a Sharpee and then much worse. Like Jane, time and time again made to feel ugly, unworthy and small. Like all of them, treated as if they were less than human, simply because they did not fit in. Picked on by peers and ignored (or worse) by adults, the poor little boy was trapped in this moment of endless bullying like some inescapable psychic cul-de-sac. Jane ached to smash the faces of the thoughtless bullies and pull the little boy close, to promise him that he was not alone, that there were others who felt his pain. To save him and to stop what Jane feared would be unavoidable, the slippery downward spiral into madness, torture and death.

Jane reluctantly tore herself away from that vision. She did not want to look into the next hole, but the temptation was impossible to resist.

Inside she saw the boy again, a little older and in a different color uniform, but still just as geeky and awkward. His face was now ablaze with radioactive-looking acne and he was crouched against the wall in a cracked concrete yard, clutching something small, furry and gray in one fist. In the other hand he held a stubby yellow pencil that he was stabbing repeatedly into the gray furry thing.

"Period, period, period..." he hissed, blood dripping from his knuckles.

Jane was appalled and horrified. It was like watching the build-up to a massive twelve-car pile-up on the freeway, the guy talking on his cell phone, the mom scolding her kids, the drunk, the girl putting on mascara, everyone oblivious but Jane, and knowing that she could do nothing to stop it. Why didn't anyone help him? Didn't anybody care? It was like letting a child waste away from the flu when a warm bed, some orange juice and the knowledge that someone cared if he got better or not would have made a world of difference.

The next hole showed an entirely more grown-up scene. A sleazy motel room with the cheap polyester coverlet thrown back off the bed. There were several crumpled bills scattered across the

nightstand. A hard-faced, red-haired woman lay topless on the bed, her arms crossed over her sagging breasts. On the other side of the bed, a scrawny blond kid barely into his twenties sat naked with his head in his hands.

"It's okay, honey," the woman said, lighting up a cigarette. "Happens all the time."

Inside the following hole was a dingy, one room apartment. The walls were covered with cut-out pictures from magazines, plastered from floor to ceiling, even pasted over the single window. Every picture seemed to be a smiling child. Catalog photos and advertisements and the sappy printed display photos that come inside picture frames when you buy them. Thousands upon thousands of pretty, happy children. Every single one had the eyes furiously scribbled out with red ink. There was no furniture, only a crummy card table and a single, metal folding chair. In the chair, facing away from Jane, was a man. He had dirty blond hair and a red and green striped sweater and he sat hunched over the table, banging his fist repeatedly against his temple.

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no..." he whispered over and over again.

The next one was sickeningly familiar to Jane. Three perfect little blonde girls skipping rope in perfect white party dresses. They were not singing the counting song from Jane's dream. They were singing a simple song about strawberry Shortcake and the letters of the alphabet. The man in the striped sweater stood by a nearby jungle gym, his back to Jane, watching them. The skipping girl stumbled, laughing and missing her step. Then she looked over toward the man in the striped sweater and drew her blonde eyebrows together, frowning and pursing her lips. She left her friends and walked over to where the man stood.

"What?" she said.

The scene inside the next hole made Jane pull back in horror, a scream clenched back between her teeth.

It was too dark to make much out, but she could see tiny, slender white arms slick with blood and twitching spastically, bound with a child's jump rope and there were other things, things far too terrible for Jane to even name.

So many more. Jane's mind reeled at the thought of it. She did not want to look anymore but she found it impossible not to.

She saw the man in the striped sweater, sharpening the blades of the glove against a smooth stone, lips twisted into silent fury.

She saw a bloody dress, found in a trash bin by a soft-spoken detective.

She saw a courtroom, furious parents sobbing and spitting and cursing, restrained by police.

She saw a man burning, dancing like a flaming angel through the night as sizzling bits of flesh dropped off in his wake.

From there the visions became stranger, dreamlike and disjointed. She saw tarry swirls of blackness and searing light. She saw a pretty brunette teenager asleep in a bathtub filled with blood. She saw jagged, twitching images that smashed into each other with a mad nonsensical glee. Eyes. Knives. Teeth. Glossy dark organs and blood-clotted hair. Mostly she saw killing. So much killing. Body after body after body slashed open and butchered until the gender, the individuality and even the humanity of the victims were erased, rending them as cold and meaningless as the slabs of plastic-wrapped meat in the supermarket cooler.

"Jane," Lola whispered. "Come on!"

Jane shook her head to clear away the horrific visions. There were hundreds more holes along the length of the hallway. What other unspeakable nightmares lurked inside? What vile fantasies and evil desires, the dark and terrifying secrets of a killer's black and undying psyche? It was more than Jane could bear.

Rose had reached the end of the hallway and was pushing open the single glossy black door. Jane wanted to call out to Rose to stop, but her voice had deserted her. How could they even be considering unleashing something as horrible as the source of those awful visions?

When Rose turned back to face Jane and the others, her cheek was bleeding, old scars suddenly fresh and oozing crimson. "Hurry," she said.

The room at the end of the hall was small and empty. The walls, floor and ceiling were all the same shiny black texture, like obsidian

or vinyl. In the center of the floor was a black plastic garbage bag. Rose was kneeling before the bag and tearing into it with her green sparkle nails. The contents spilled out across the floor. Powdery, pale gray ash peppered with a few cracked and broken lumps of bone. Rose's cheek was bleeding heavily and so was her wrist where she had sliced herself with Freddy's glove. Drops of her blood fell into the ash and the ash quivered oddly, like iron shavings stirred by a magnet.

Jane felt something wet on her arm and when she looked down, she saw that she too was bleeding again from the self-inflicted cut. Lola and Amber too, but their blood was not dripping downward. It flowed away from them, twisting through the air in gory streams, toward the twitching ash heap.

An oily red curve like a large bubble appeared in the center of the pile, growing larger and larger until Jane realized that it was the crown of a skull. The ashes swirled like dust devils as a skeletal face appeared, followed by the vertebrae of a neck. The bloody ash wove itself together to form long bones and the delicate curve of a rib cage. Behind that bony cage, a knot of blood coagulated into a pulsating lump of slippery meat, a slowly beating heart.

Jane watched, paralyzed with terror as thick blue veins grew through the newly formed, ropy muscles like strangle-vines, Skin began to slither over the limbs and torso, thick, rippling scar tissue rolling like water across the surface of the muscles until finally, a fully formed man stood before them, yellowy eyes wide open and mouth a silent scream. He was naked for an awful instant then the coiling weave of clothing wound around him. Brown pants. A dirty red and green striped sweater and finally a crumpled fedora hat. The soles of his greasy boots touched down amid the shredded plastic of the garbage bag and Freddy Krueger stood before them, head cocked suspiciously as he eyed the girls surrounding him.

"Who are you?" he asked. "Why are you here?"

"Freddy," Rose called, clutching the dirty bundle that held the bladed glove. "Don't you recognize me?"

He frowned, eyes narrow. "Mmmmmmmmm, little Rose," he said, leering at her, a smile curling in the corner of his narrow lips. "My,

how you've grown."

He lunged toward Rose and Jane let out a tiny airless gasp. Rose did not flinch. Instead she pulled the glove from the bundle and held it out toward him.

"Stop," she said. "Wait."

He took a step back, suspicious and unsure.

"We have your glove," Rose said. "The nexus of your power. We brought you back and now we have a job for you."

"A job?" He smirked. "What makes you think I would do a job for you?"

"Because you want this." She held up the glove and his eyes fixed anxiously on the glinting blades.

"Tell me," he said.

She pulled a crumpled dress from her bag, the one she was wearing the night of the gang rape.

"We want you to kill six boys," Rose said, tossing the dress to the ground at his feet. "Connor Hall. Kevin Park. David Worthy. David Carslip. Richard Tremont. Brandon Ortiz."

The sound of Brandon's name cut into Jane like a rusty saw. Her hurt and anger was still fresh inside her, and she wanted Brandon to suffer for that hurt, but did she really want him dead? But it was just a dream, right? A scary, awful dream, but still just a dream. She watched, unable to breathe, as Freddy crouched down and clutched the dress in his fist. He brought it to his face, inhaling deeply.

"Yeah," he said. "So say I do your dirty work for you. Then what?"

"Then the glove is yours," Rose said.

"Are you crazy?" Lola asked.

"Shhhhhhhhh," Amber whispered.

Freddy looked around, locking eyes with each of the girls.

"You girls are playing a very dangerous game," he said. "You may have the upper hand right now, but I promise you..." He took a step closer to Rose. "I'll be paying you each a very special visit. You won't get away with this."

There was a strange, nearly subliminal sound irritating Jane, distracting her like a mosquito or a leaf blower down the block. It

grew louder and louder until it was nearly deafening. The keening electric voice of the alarm clock.

To Jane's surprise and horror, Rose dove at Freddy, throwing her arms around him like a crazed fan at a rock concert. Jane tried to call out to her, but no sound would come. She clenched her fists as an awful gush of vertigo filled her and then she was kicking and struggling against the confines of her bedroll. She scrambled free, sock feet ice cold against the damp cement of the boiler room floor. She grabbed her flashlight and clicked it on, the yellow circle of light skating over the slowly waking forms of her friends.

"Holy shit," Lola said, sitting up and running her fingers through her purple hair.

"Was that real?" Amber asked, eyes wide in the dim light.

"Yes," Rose said, rolling over and sitting up. Clutched tightly in her arms was a ratty red and green sweater.

"Oh my God," Jane whispered as the fabric of the sweater began to thin and disintegrate, coiling off into the air like smoke. "What have we done?"

FOURTEEN

Connor Hall lay in Shayne's bed, holding her delicate, slender body against his, face buried in her soft red hair. He was feeling intensely sentimental, maudlin and unworthy of her love. She was, without a doubt, the best thing that had ever happened to him. So beautiful and clean, perfect in every way. Even though he had been unfaithful, she still wanted him, still loved him. He did not deserve her.

When she had called him that afternoon, just the sound of her voice made his heart twist inside his chest. She told him her parents were out and he should come over right away. He could not drive fast enough to get to her house and showed up still sweaty in his workout gear.

He normally wrestled at one-seventy, but had gained three pounds since Shayne had withdrawn and refused to see him and he was seriously in danger of getting bumped up to the next weight class. Without her guidance, he found himself bingeing on junk food and just eating whatever was around the house instead of sticking to the rigid diet that she had worked out for him. He stood there on her doorstep, anxious and unsure, worried about the loss of definition in his abs, but when she opened the door, all that went away. She was in the hot little black lace outfit that she wore the first time they were together and Connor knew everything was going to be okay.

She rocked his world, driving him like a Ferrari up on Angeles Crest, and when she had worn him down to nothing, she held him in her arms and told him that she knew all about the incident with Rose.

"Baby," she said. "I know I wasn't there for you. I was going through my own problems and I just wasn't emotionally available."

He nodded, stupid with endorphins and content to let her run her fingers through his hair.

"When I heard about what happened with that crazy girl, I was mad at first, but then I realized that I was partially to blame." She kissed his temple. "Anyway, it's not as if you cheated on me with, like, a real person."

"That's right," he said. "That psycho slut was nothing but a temporary cumdumpster. I don't love her like I love you."

"I love you too, baby," she said, smiling, and started all over again.

Now they lay together, exhausted and spent, and Connor was starting to feel like everything was back to normal. Shayne had teased him about the extra weight and scolded him for not keeping up his food diary like she had taught him. She told him that she was going to have to go back to the old system of reviewing his daily food diary and making decisions about how much sex he would be allowed to have based on his total caloric and carbohydrate intake. He knew he would eat nothing but lettuce and ice cubes for the rest of his life if it made Shayne happy. He was lucky if his mom would turn off the TV long enough to even notice that he still lived in her house, but Shayne really cared about him. She wanted him to be the best he could be. She supported his dream to compete in the Olympics and he knew he could never make it without her.

Holding her sleeping body against his, he felt like the luckiest guy on the planet. He wrapped his arm tighter around her tiny ribcage, feeling her little heart fluttering like a bird against his wrist, and silently promised her that he would never let her down, never cheat on her again. He would lose the weight and get back into perfect shape, and when he brought home that gold medal, it would be for her.

Closing his eyes and breathing in her smell, he decided that he would start saving now and buy her an engagement ring for graduation. He would get down on his knees in his graduation gown and ask her to marry him. So what if they were only eighteen? He knew he would never find another woman as perfect and sexy and beautiful and forgiving and supportive. She was the one. It was that simple.

"I love you so much," he whispered, kissing her sleek, freckled shoulder.

She didn't wake, just unconsciously snuggled tighter against him. Content for the first time in ages, Connor drifted off to sleep.

In his dream, Connor found himself in the gym, standing toe to toe with an unknown opponent. The other wrestler wore an Immaculate

Heart singlet, but his face was hidden behind the rigid, protective, goalie-like mask that some wrestlers wear if they've recently broken a nose. Connor stood, trying to stare the other guy down, but his opponent's eyes were barely visible, nothing but a wet shine in the depths of the oval eyeholes. The guy reached out and Connor slapped his hand in a rote pantomime of sportsmanship, eager to get on with it. Something about this guy was really bothering him. Connor couldn't wait to get him on the mat.

The ref blew the whistle and they locked up in a quick, brutal clinch. Connor gripped the back of his opponent's head and muscled it downward, bringing the other guy nearly to his knees. When he broke loose and shot back up, Connor went in for a single leg takedown. The guy went down easily and flipped instantly on to his stomach. Connor was on him in a flash as the ref held up two fingers.

"Two for takedown," he called.

With his opponent on all fours, Connor reached across that blank, masked face and grabbed the guy's right arm. He figured this was gonna be a piece of cake as he grabbed hold of the guy's left leg with his other hand and pushed until the guy collapsed onto his right side. Swiftly bringing his arm around the guy's head and leg, Connor got his opponent in a stiff cradle and fought to roll him over onto his back.

The ref was crouching close, watching for the pin. Connor felt inches from victory when his opponent suddenly spun on his side and gripped Connor's arm in a nasty and totally illegal arm bar, bending Connor's forearm against the elbow until it was close to breaking. The ref said nothing at this outrage and in a blind fury of pain and indignation, Connor lifted his opponent off the mat as he clung to Connor's arm and slammed him down hard on his back.

The ref's whistle sounded and Connor turned toward him, waiting for him to penalize his opponent. Amazingly, he pointed at Connor and said "Illegal slam!" The ref held up two fingers toward the other guy. "Two points for stand up."

Connor turned on the ref, boiling mad. "Are you out of your mind?" he raged. "He tried to break my arm."

The ref stood, silent and stone-faced, and his masked opponent gestured for Connor to bring it on. Surfing the tide of his anger, Connor dove in for a ferocious double leg takedown, hitting him like a bullet to the stomach and knocking him on his back. Unfazed, his opponent immediately wrapped his legs around Connor's head and right arm in some kind of unfamiliar Jujitsu chokehold. Almost instantly, Connor began losing oxygen, consciousness dimming. In a last, desperate rush of strength, he lifted his opponent and slammed him down once and then again. The hold weakened and Connor was able to get free just as the ref's whistle blew again, penalizing him while once again totally ignoring the blatantly illegal maneuvers of his opponent.

"Fuck you, asshole," he said to the ref.

As he berated the ref, his opponent got to his feet and kicked Connor in the head, shin slamming into Connor's temple like a lead pipe. Connor went down, a scatter of pale fireworks shooting across his vision.

The ref crouched down and stuck two smug fingers in Connor's face. "Two for takedown," he said.

"What?" Connor was punchy and sick, a thick spike of pain shooting through his skull.

Before he could force out another word, his opponent kned him in the head, and his skull rattled like broken glass. He rolled away, pure adrenaline forcing him back to his wobbly feet.

Connor was utterly furious now. This was completely wrong in every way. The guy was making a total mockery of the sport, and the ref was acting like it was no big deal. Connor was through with this bullshit. No more Mr Nice Guy. His opponent took a wild swing, a sloppy right hook that Connor dodged easily, ducking beneath to grab the guy's waist and throw him down with a hip toss. The guy landed awkwardly on his back, with Connor standing between his legs. Connor drew back and punched him, feeling the plastic mask crack beneath his knuckles. He let the guy have it again and a third time as the cracks widened and spread. His opponent got his legs wrapped around Connor's waist and reached under his own ass to grab one of Connor's ankles. Connor went down and the masked guy

was on him right away, gouging his left thumb into Connor's right eye, following with a vicious elbow to the head. An involuntary wordless sound tore loose from deep inside Connor and he grabbed his opponent's balls with one hand, squeezing like a vice while the other hand pressed in on the guy's Adam's apple. His opponent dropped, gasping to the mat, but scrambled backward and got back to his feet as fast as Connor. Unbelievably the guy kicked Connor in the head again and Connor was too slow to block the impact. He collapsed, barely conscious, on his belly.

A bright flare of agony brought Connor back to full awareness as his opponent gripped Connor's right leg in a painful toehold, pulling the shin toward himself with his right arm while pushing Connor's foot down and away with his left hand. Connor howled with fury and pain and reached back to grip the edge of that emotionless mask, peeling it away.

The skin beneath the mask was horribly burned, yellow eyes blazing with almost jovial evil as the thin, twisted lips coiled into a sneer. "Do you submit?" his opponent asked.

A cold gush of fear flooded Connor's body and he twisted and wrenched himself free, staggering to his feet and stumbling away. His opponent threw back his head and laughed, the low, nasty sound echoing through the dim gymnasium.

Connor ran, terror screaming through his veins as he hit the locker room door. The familiar layout of the locker room had changed, forming a complex maze of identical, featureless lockers. He could hear footsteps close behind but he was afraid to look back. Connor was growing painfully winded as he ran but there seemed to be no end to the narrow corridors. He chose his direction at random, increasingly desperate until he came out of the lockers and into an elongated, old-fashioned shower room totally unlike the clean, familiar showers at the school. The grungy, green tile was mildewed and cracked and the big, flat, dinner plate-sized showerheads all sprouted from a central pipe that ran like a spine across the low ceiling. A shadow fell across the shower room door just as Connor realized with horror that he was naked.

His hideous opponent appeared in the doorway, clad in nothing but a filthy towel wrapped around his waist. His entire body was like his face, covered in thick, pink scar tissue, and he chuckled softly, stepping forward and reaching up to pull a rusted chain beside the first showerhead.

A hot, sticky downpour blinded Connor, filling his senses with a thick coppery stench like raw meat and pennies. He wiped his eyes with his knuckles and saw that the showerheads were gushing blood. His opponent stood at the far end of the room and tilted his face up, closing his eyes and luxuriating in the hot spray. He ran his hands over his bald head as if shampooing nonexistent hair and then turned to Connor and winked.

"Don't drop the soap," he said, and made a sudden, predatory lunge at Connor.

Connor tried to run but the tile was slick with clotting blood and he slipped, teetering precariously off balance. The drain in the floor was clogged and the doorway had somehow disappeared, leaving nothing but seamless tile. The blood was up to Connor's knees and rising fast. He scrambled to get away from his opponent, but the man just casually circled him, biding his time as the blood rose to their waists and then to their chests. Panic drilled into Connor's heart as his feet left the floor, flailing to keep his head above the level of the rising blood. He watched the blood close over the untroubled head of his opponent and imagined the burned man moving silent and shark-like beneath the surface, reaching for Connor's naked and vulnerable body. Every centimeter of Connor's skin cringed with hideous expectation, his balls trying to crawl up into his belly. Six inches of air beneath the filthy ceiling became four, then two and Connor sucked in a desperate breath as he went under, head bumping repeatedly against the ceiling, awareness eclipsed by airless red darkness.

Then, with no transition, he was standing, dry and safe before a glittering silver curtain. He could hear the sound of a huge crowd on the other side, stomping and howling, but the burned man was nowhere in sight. Somewhere, heavy guitar chords thundered over a

huge, booming sound system and Connor pushed through the curtain into a vast, darkened arena.

A blinding spotlight hit him and he squinted fiercely, a tidal wave of boos and hisses washing over him. When his eyes adjusted, he was mortified to see that he was dressed in pink and gold spandex tights, gold boots and a flowing gold cape. An announcer's voice came over the speakers.

"From Hemingway High, five feet ten inches and weighing in at one hundred and seventy three pounds..." The announcer paused, sniggering. "Olympic hopeful and accused date rapist, Captain Mysterio."

The crowd booed and whistled. Connor frowned at the goofy moniker as a blonde in a pink bikini appeared beside him. She was hugely but artificially endowed, and her eyes were cold and hard beneath her mascara-thick lashes. She took his arm, digging long, red talons into his skin, and she led him down the ramp. She took the goofy cape from his shoulders and he ducked between the ropes of a springy, oversized wrestling ring.

A trill of spooky minor key notes sounded through the speakers and the crowd went wild, chanting, "Fre—DDY, Fre—DDY, Fre—DDY!!"

Connor could make out signs in the crowd. Hand-lettered paper signs that said things like, "KILL 'EM KRUEGER" and "CONNOR FEARS FREDDY." Several audience members held up giant, wobbly foam hands with long knives on each finger. Connor could not make out any faces, just endless rows of pale ovals with three dark holes in place of features. At the top of the ramp, Connor's opponent appeared from behind the curtain.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the announcer said. "The all-time heavyweight champion of supernatural slaughter, child killer and sleep stalker, the man of your dreams, hailing from parts unknown... The one... the only... Frrrrrrrrrrreddy Krrrrrrrrrruuuuuegerrrrrrr!"

The burned man raised his hands to the audience. He was shirtless, clad in brown tights and boots with a red and green striped cape, accompanied by two, cute young girls in matching pink and blue pajamas. He was holding a microphone.

"Let me tell you something, Captain Mysterio," he said, his amplified voice echoing through the arena. "When I get you in the ring, I'm gonna be your worst nightmare!"

He threw down the microphone and slowly drew his thumb across his throat. The crowd went berserk as he started down the ramp at a leisurely stroll, stopping along the way to slap hands and sign autographs.

Connor could not figure out why they kept calling him that stupid name. Captain Mysterio. How lame could you get? Then he reached up to rub his mouth on the back of his hand and felt stiff leather around his lips. His hands groped over his head and he realized he was wearing a spandex mask that covered his whole head.

He struggled with the knotted laces, trying to pull the stupid thing off his head as Freddy entered the ring to a huge flourish of fireworks jetting from the tops of the ring posts. Connor looked up and saw a large chain-link cage being lowered down over the ring. He dove for the edge but the cage slammed down, trapping him with Freddy inside the ring.

The audience booed and hissed, tossing strange, wet things that splattered and bounced off the cage. Connor struggled back up to his feet and faced his opponent. A voice spoke up over the sound system.

"It's quite a match we've got lined up tonight in the Dream Arena, Jim Patton."

Another voice answered. "That's right, Dick Banner, quite a match."

A bell rang and before Connor knew what was happening, Freddy had grabbed the hem of the mask and yanked it around, blinding Connor with pink spandex.

"Looks like Krueger has twisted the mask of Captain Mysterio, effectively blinding him."

Connor felt a negligible, thudding blow to his chest as he struggled to right the stupid mask.

"Unbelievable, Dick. Looks like a Double-Axe Handle there from Krueger."

"And Captain Mysterio is at a distinct disadvantage with his mask turned around like that."

"He's like a sitting duck, Dick."

"And a Back Rake, followed by an Asiatic Spike to the trapezius."

Connor felt several more light, glancing blows and he flailed out against his unseen opponent, hitting nothing. Then suddenly he was airborne, lifted high and brought down hard on his back, breath knocked out of him in a rush.

"Ooooh, nice Body Slam by Krueger."

"And what's this?"

"Looks like Krueger's going up to the top rope."

Connor struggled to sit up and was slammed back down to the springy mat.

"Atomic Elbow off the top rope."

"Unbelievable."

"He's going for the pin."

Then he felt his opponent's weight on his body and three quick slaps inches from his ear. A bell sounded.

"One, two and three. And the first round goes to Krueger."

First round? Connor pushed the weight off his body and finally ripped the mask off, tossing it away into a corner. Able to see again, he narrowed his eyes at his opponent. There was no way he was letting that freak near him. All bets were off. He was gonna kick that fucker's ass, pink spandex be damned.

As soon as the bell rang again, he charged at Freddy, hitting with a shoulder to the midsection and knocked his opponent into the cage.

"Oooh, right in the lunch."

"Captain Mysterio starting off the second round with an aggressive offensive attack against Freddy Krueger."

Holding Freddy against the wire, Connor punched him repeatedly in his bald, scarred head. Without giving his opponent a chance to strike back, Connor gripped Freddy around the waist, lifted him up over his shoulder and slammed him down to the mat, falling on top of him with his full weight.

"Nice takedown from Mysterio."

"That had to hurt, Dick."

Connor immediately sprang back up to his feet and hauled Freddy with him, lifting his dazed opponent straight up, over his head and

throwing him into the cage. When Freddy crumpled to the mat, Connor leapt on him, pounding him brutally with fists and knees. His opponent's scarred head lolled back and forth like a rag doll's as Connor unleashed every ounce of pent-up anger against his tormentor.

"Mysterio dominating the second round, pummeling Krueger repeatedly in an unprecedented display of violent brutality."

"But what about that pin, Dick? Brawling is fine in your local bar, but Mysterio's not getting out of that cage until he can pin Krueger fair and square and win two out of three falls."

Connor cocked his head. So that's how they wanted to play it. Fine. Connor finally felt as if he understood the twisted dream logic of this horrible endless fight and he was determined to end this madness once and for all. He scooped up Freddy's head and arms and applied slow, steady pressure as he lay across his opponent's prone body, pinning him chest to chest against the mat.

"Looks like Mysterio's going for the pin."

"One... Two..."

Freddy jerked his torso violently, raising one shoulder off the mat.

"Ooooooooooh, only a two count, Jim."

"He's not gonna beat Krueger that easily."

Freddy stood, hunched and wheezing and Connor got up and nailed him with a stiff uppercut. Freddy fell backward and once down on the mat, he kicked Connor's legs out from under him. Connor cursed and scrambled to his feet. He lunged at Freddy and his opponent leapt away, running and making Connor chase him around the ring. Connor reached out to grab Freddy and Freddy turned and kicked him in the balls.

Connor sucked air, blinded by pain and staggered back into the wire of the cage.

"A low blow from Krueger."

Freddy started climbing up the side of the cage and Connor swallowed the sickening ache between his legs and forced himself to climb up after him.

The cage was dizzyingly high, twenty feet at least and Connor refused to look down as he pursued Freddy higher and higher up the

cage wall. Reaching for Freddy's ankle, Connor sank his teeth into Freddy's calf. The taste of dirty burnt flesh and unwashed cloth gagged him, but he bit down harder. Freddy howled and tried to punch Connor. Connor grabbed his wrist and bit him again, then peeled Freddy off the cage. Flinging his opponent over his shoulder, Connor leapt off the side of the cage, plummeting to the mat and landing on top of Freddy.

As his opponent lay there, dazed and barely moving, Connor quickly climbed the cage again and, not even entirely sure what he was doing, but filled with a crazy kind of dream-confidence, he jumped into the air, arching backward in a kind of reverse somersault and landing square across the prone body of Freddy.

"Unbelievable moonsault off the top of the cage."

"He's going for the cover."

"That's it, Jim. It's one... two... and three. The second round goes to young Mysterio."

"Unbelievable."

Connor stood, breath heaving and looked around. The crowd screamed and booed as he leaned against the ring post, heart close to bursting in his chest.

"Well, Jim, Krueger took quite a beating at the hands of Captain Mysterio in that round."

"He sure did, Dick. That kid's got a lot of heart."

"But does he have what it takes to finish the job and achieve victory over undefeated champion, Freddy Krueger? That's the question as we head into the third and final round. Unbelievable action here in the Dream Arena."

"Unbelievable, Jim."

Freddy staggered to his corner and squatted down, back to Connor. The two pajama girls came running over and one passed something through the wire of the cage. Freddy stood and turned to face Connor again and Connor saw that he held a large hypodermic needle. He smiled and plunged the needle into the crook of his arm.

Unsure of what to expect, Connor took a step back, wary. Freddy's eyes rolled up into his head and thick wormy veins bulged across the surface of his skin, his face turning a deep, angry red. Suddenly, his

muscles seemed alive under his skin, swelling and pulsing and growing huge. Like the Hulk, his body twisted and transformed, becoming thicker, larger and stacked with muscle on top of muscle on top of muscle until he was seven feet tall and four hundred pounds, as wide as a house. He flexed his massive arms and screamed and the crowd echoed with howls and shrieks of their own.

To Connor's amazement, he tore a huge section loose from the cage, ripping the wire and smashing the poles. Connor turned to run, but Freddy ripped the ring ropes loose from the post and threw them around Connor, pulling him back and down and pinning his arms to his sides as Freddy pounded him with basketball-sized fists. He dragged the struggling Connor to the edge of the ring, where the pajama girls were waiting. One reached into her cleavage and pulled out a shiny silver object, passing it to Freddy. The other girl sauntered over to the ref and started peeling off her top, juggling her implants in the cups of her bra.

"Looks like one of Freddy's girls is trying to distract the ref."

"What's this Dick? Is that a foreign object?"

Freddy bore down on Connor, slashing at his face. As the silver object gouged his forehead Connor saw with baffled disbelief that it was a fork. He struggled to keep the fork away from his face but Freddy was too strong. He slashed at Connor's cheeks and chest, opening up huge gashes. The tines of the fork were as sharp as razors and Connor screamed and screamed. The ref's back was still turned as he scolded the two pajama-clad cuties in the corner of the ring. The faces of the crowd started to blur together as sweat and blood mixed in Connor's eyes.

"A valiant effort, Jim, but it looks as if it's all over for Captain Mysterio."

He felt the sharp tines of the fork slicing deep into his arms then suddenly, he was wide-awake, sitting bolt upright in Shayne's bed.

Relief washed over him and he raised his hand to wipe the sweat away from his eyes. His hand came away bloody.

Pain sizzled through his body as he realized the cuts from his dream were all real, bleeding copiously onto Shayne's clean, white

sheets. He reached out to touch her sleeping shoulder, forcing her name between his lips.

"Shayne," he whispered. "Shayne, I'm bleeding. Call 911."

She rolled toward him and he recoiled, staggering backward out of bed and slamming against the wall.

Shayne was dead. Her long, white neck was slashed to the bone, her pretty face cut to bloody ribbons. Connor felt as if he were screaming, but no sound was coming out except for a kind of tight, high-pitched whine like an animal in a trap. His beautiful, perfect girl, his one and only love, lay there butchered and violated and he was fading fast, dizzy and nauseous. He reached shaking hands out to her and saw that both his forearms were sliced open from wrist to inner elbow. He collapsed, sobbing. Saying Shayne's name over and over, he fumbled for his cell phone in the pocket of his crumpled sweats. The phone slipped uselessly from his numb fingers and dropped to the carpet, the bright little screen displaying a photograph of Shayne, blowing him a kiss. He squeezed his eyes shut.

"Is this a dream?" he asked.

Those were his last words.

FIFTEEN

When everyone should have been crackling like autumn leaves over the imminent Homecoming game and dance, a black pall shaded every conversation at the school. Jane felt both the hush and underlying buzz before she even reached the school steps. Something had gone horribly wrong. In the hallways, girls cried as they leaned against the walls and gathered in knots at lockers. Nervous laughter occasionally escaped the lowered conversations of the guys, the more juvenile creatures making bad jokes in a desperate attempt to cover up their shock. Couples who would normally be surgically attached at the lower lip clung to one another more loosely, some clasping hands tentatively as if in distrust of everything that drew them together.

Jane observed these odd poses as she made her way to her locker, dread already broken wide open inside of her. She could not stop thinking about what they had done the night before. Jane's shoulder still ached from the sleeping bag on the cement floor and the place on her arm where she made the cut still stung from the dirty blade of the glove. She had never been badly hurt before, except emotionally. This new sensation of self-inflicted pain flagged some new phase of sensation; an initiation, a new development in her flesh. She could tell that, once it healed, it would form a thin, pasty welt not unlike the scars of the German eagle on that guy's back. But this scar was not nearly as beautiful and could only remind her of the strangest night of her life. It was all too excruciatingly real. And the dirty sweater; it must have been a hallucination, a leftover effect from the sleeping pills. Jane reeled at the memory. Could it have happened at all? Did they really do what she thought they did last night? Perhaps the whole excursion was a dream. Perhaps she never slept anywhere but her bed and the soreness in her shoulder came from sleeping wrong. But the cut, that was something else entirely. Dream fragments seemed to snag the fabric of her morning thoughts and the sleeping pill still fogged her. She still felt drugged.

All too weird. Too dark.

Much, much too dark.

Jane carefully watched the wet faces and red noses, the teachers moving in packs as they talked in low voices, the spontaneous eruption of emotion and expletives from different quarters. As she worked at the combination of her locker, Rose sidled up to her.

"I feel great, don't you?" she enthused. "It's like Christmas morning!"

Jane frowned, saying nothing. She pulled out the thick chemistry book from her locker and crammed it into her backpack. As she did so, her cell phone bleated. Balancing the book on her knee, she reached into the pack and grabbed it. "Hello?"

"It's me and oh my God!" It was Lola. "Oh. My. GOD."

"What?" Jane asked, eyeing Rose, who leaned against her locker, staring into space and looking almost love-struck. "Talk!"

"You didn't hear?" Lola said, shocked. "No fucking way!"

"Hear what?"

"Connor's dead. Shayne, too. He, like, killed her and then killed himself. Is that not fucking insane?"

Fuck. Jane could only think it, not say it. Fuck! Her mind raced as it struggled to calculate the true meaning for them all.

"Are you there?"

"Yeah," Jane said. She shot Rose a frightened look. "I can't believe it is all."

"Believe what?" Rose asked, eyes bright.

"Shayne and Connor are dead," she said, tilting the cell phone away from her mouth.

Rose closed her eyes, sucking in a deep breath. Then a slow, dreamy smile spread across her face. She looked as if her one true love had just popped the question. She opened her eyes again and looked at Jane. There was a fervor in those green eyes that was almost religious in its mad intensity. "Beautiful," she whispered.

Jane's heart clenched and she drew back from Rose, completely horrified by her reaction. There was nothing to rejoice over. Wanting revenge was one thing. Getting it in such a violent and terrible way was entirely another. And what about Shayne? True, she was an evil bitch, but that didn't warrant the death penalty!

"Gotta go..." Jane muttered to Rose, slinking away, phone still in hand. The girl was so far on cloud nine, she barely seemed to notice Jane's departure.

"Jane," Lola's voice squawked through the phone as Jane migrated toward French class. "Jane, are you okay?"

"No, I'm not," Jane replied. "Did you hear that?"

"No, what?"

"Rose. She's..." Jane couldn't even figure out how to phrase the way Rose's reaction made her feel. "She's thrilled."

"Oh God," Lola said. "This is fuckin' messed up, Jane!"

"Tell me about it. Have you called Amber?"

"She's the one who told me. Here."

Lola put Amber on the phone. "Hey," Amber said. She sniffed, her voice cracked. She had known Shayne pretty well in spite of the way the redhead had treated her. This must have been wrecking her, not just with the loss, but with guilt.

"Hey," Jane replied.

"I've got to go in a sec, but I just need to know something."

"Yeah?"

"We did what we did last night... didn't we?"

"I have the scab from a cut on my arm." Jane replied. "Do you?"

Silence. Then, "Yeah."

"Shit," Jane said under her breath. "Are you going to be okay?"

"I think so," she replied. Her voice cracked again. "But I can tell you I could sure use a fucking drink right now. Or twelve."

Jane had no idea how to respond to that. "Well," she said pointlessly, "I guess I'll see you soon."

The French teacher, the History teacher, everyone was subdued. When she entered homeroom, there was an announcement by the principal on the school PA system.

"There has been a terrible tragedy that we will not soon forget," he intoned with more sincerity than Jane expected. "We lost two fine students last night in a senseless act of violence."

When he finished his speech, he asked for a moment of silence. Jane closed her eyes and wished that this was not happening. There

was still some hazy gap between what they had done and the deaths, as if the two would not touch in her mind. Because if they did...

"Counselors are on standby at the office. Please feel free to talk about your feelings about this tragedy with them."

The cut on Jane's arm throbbed. Yeah, let's talk about our feelings, now, shall we? The person who had the most feelings was Rose, and Jane was beginning to suspect that she was a sociopath, and that was on a good day. Jane had only met the big-eyed, endlessly sniffing school counselor once but she could see how a discussion with the use less woman would go.

Jane: "It feels surreal."

Counselor: "Of course it does. No one expects someone so young to die."

Jane: "No, I mean, what happened last night! It couldn't have happened, but it did."

Counselor: "Denial is the first phase in the grief process. It's perfectly normal."

Jane: "I'm not in denial, you idiot. I know they died."

Counselor: "Good! Let it out. Don't hold back your tears."

Jane: "But I feel guilty."

Counselor: "Of course. It's survivor's guilt. That's normal, too."

Jane: "Something has been unleashed. Something terrible..."

She pictured the blank look on the vapid counselor's face as she described the encounter with a dead murderer. Then she pictured smashing the counselor's oh-so-deeply-concerned face in and was horrified by her own violent hostility. What the hell was happening to her?

During lunch, the news vans and cameras lingered outside the school, waiting for students to pass so that they could get 'reactions.' Jane felt sick as she watched them swoop in on her classmates. Dour-faced jocks talked to anchormen and women, slowly chewing gum as they answered questions in monosyllables. The principal and school administrators descended on the media hyenas, driving them back from the school entrance and across the street.

As Jane drowned in her doubts, some of the other wrestling team members passed her. They were paler than she was as they huddled

quietly in the hallways, talking in guarded tones. Sometimes girls would pass and hug them, and other guys would offer stiff macho condolences. But from the looks on their faces, a lot more was going down. They looked nervous, drawn, spooked—not entirely unlike Jane herself. Random whispers floated over to where Jane was standing.

"... in Shayne's bed... She was ripped to shreds... blood soaked everything... slashed his wrists... Cheating on him... mother screaming... heard him next door... can't believe... insane..."

She quickly opened her phone and tried the browser on the little screen. After an eternity of pecking at the small keys, she was able to log in and found the Yahoo News page. A report had already been aired about the bloody murder-suicide involving Connor Hall and Shayne Donovan, and every news wire was carrying it. They all reported that Hall 'had no history of mental illness and showed no symptoms of being at risk.' As Jane read, she heard Rose's voice in her mind reciting the names of the boys to be killed.

Connor Hall. Kevin Park. David Worthy. David Carslip. Richard Tremont. Brandon Ortiz...

Her mother had called twice, but left messages since Jane didn't (or couldn't) answer. By the time fourth period came, some students had left for home, mostly the closest friends of Shayne and Connor. Parents lined the school front, relocating haggard-looking students to family sized vehicles. In some cases, the students drove themselves, tossing their belongings into backseats and wheeling away, windows up and stereos blaring

But not everyone was allowed to leave. And some who could have left, didn't.

As Jane pressed down the hallway to her locker after the last bell, a strong hand grasped her arm.

"Jane, I've got to talk to you!"

It was Brandon. Jane shook him off and proceeded toward her locker. "Leave me alone!"

"You don't understand, Jane," he pleaded. "I never did anything to Rose, I swear it. And now things are weird... bad."

"Yeah," she blurted, desperate to keep him emotionally at arm's length. "Bad because you all feel guilty for what you did."

In truth, she only half believed that, torn between the rational and the irrational. She might have had a weird dream experience that just happened to coincide with the reality of Connor's mental state. But if it was real, if Freddy was real, that meant eventually it would be Brandon's turn. As angry as she was with him, did she honestly want him dead, butchered like Connor and Shayne? How could she have done this?

He hunkered close to her and she could smell his warm, familiar scent, slipping effortlessly under her armor. She hated how easily her body betrayed her.

"We all had bad nightmares last night," he whispered. "Not the whole team, just the guys who... you know. I don't understand it. It's like... like we all knew it was gonna happen."

Nightmares. Jane paused, hands deep in her locker. "You too, right" she asked softly.

Brandon nodded. "But Jane, I swear I never touched Rose. On my life, on my mother's life, I swear it. You gotta believe me. Listen..." He paused. "I think Connor and Shayne were murdered." He leaned against the lockers, wrapping his big arms around himself. "I'm afraid I'm gonna be next. Please listen to me..."

"Sounds like guilt to me," Jane snapped, slamming her locker door closed and spinning the lock.

With that, she left him in the hallway, hands in pockets. He didn't even try to follow her, and somehow that managed to dig deeper under her scabs and twist another knife in her heart.

Outside, Lola was waiting for her, skateboard clutched under her arm. A lone news van lurked a little down the street. "I don't think Amber is coming to study today," she said. "She's meeting up with her sponsor. The last time I talked to her she said she was parked outside a bar. She couldn't stop crying."

"Honestly," Jane asked, warily watching the van and the media hyenas. "Do you think what we did had anything to do with this?"

"How the fuck should I know? Besides, it's what Rose did, not us. This whole crazy Freddy thing was her idea."

"We helped her," Jane countered. "And she's a lunatic, Lola, a certifiable madwoman. Have you seen her stroking her cheek? It's really weird."

"What can we do?" Lola asked. "Maybe there's some way we can... I don't know... undo what we did."

"How the hell would we do that?" Jane asked. "The horses are out, Lola."

She took off down the sidewalk and Lola followed. "We could steal that fucking glove," Lola said. "And then ... burn it or something."

"You think you could get it from Rose? Do you even know where she lives?"

Lola shrugged. In the time they had known Rose, she never mentioned an address or even what neighborhood she lived in. She always just showed up.

"I'm going home," Jane said. She picked up speed as she walked past Lola.

"Can I come with you?" Lola asked sheepishly. "I don't want to be alone."

Jane caved. Lola was her best friend, after all. Jane stopped, the love for her friend heavy in her stomach, and hugged her. As she and Lola comforted each other, Jane noticed the anchorwoman down the street talking to one camera as another trained on the two girls. She nudged Lola, who scowled at the news people and flipped them off.

Lola spent the rest of the day and evening at Jane's house. They listened to TSOL and Handel, and Lola oohed and aahed at how cool Jane's computer was as they surfed for naked pictures of a young actor Lola was inexplicably obsessed with.

"I don't see the appeal," Jane said, frowning at a still frame of the skinny actor in the shower. The quality was not good but you could see a sliver of dark pubic hair and maybe a little more.

Lola leaned forward as if she could somehow peek beneath the lower edge of the screen. "He gives me a raging girl boner," she said. "I want to eat him."

"He's so..." Jane clicked over to another picture of him standing naked by a curtained window, back to the camera. "I don't know. So

waifish. I don't want to have sex with him, I just want to make him some nice lasagna."

"Well, he's no Brandon Ortiz," Lola joked and then immediately recoiled. "Aw shit, Jane, I'm sorry."

Again, the twisting knife in her heart. She shrugged it off and tried to recapture the lighthearted camaraderie from moments before, but was unable to do so. A part of her wanted to comment on the murders on her Live Journal, to get this awful stew of contradictory feelings off her chest, but she hadn't the slightest clue what she could possibly write that would not seem either laughable, or criminally insane, or both.

The dinner table was tense. Jane's mother was unhappy that Jane never returned her calls.

"I'm sorry, Mom," she said, poking at her uneaten vegetables with the back of her fork. "Can't we talk about it later?"

When Lola's boyfriend called just after dinner, Lola announced she had to go. "I need to blow off some steam," she said. "It'll help me take my mind off things. I mean, you're my friend and all but, 'Lesbo' moniker notwithstanding, I just don't think of you that way."

"Be safe," Jane said. "And I don't just mean condoms."

"I will," Lola replied.

Jane wished she could find a way to make her friend stay. She watched Lola walk out to her van with a dull, frozen dread spreading through her belly.

As Jane got ready for bed, her mother leaned in the doorframe of her bedroom and crossed her arms. She looked worried. "Are you sure you don't want to talk about it?"

"About what?" She climbed into bed.

"About everything. You've been acting really strange lately and now these murders..."

"People die every day, Mom." Jane rolled over in her bed, away from her mother.

"I just want to make sure you're alright," her mother said, her voice tentative, clueless.

Jane looked back at her mother. Why couldn't she just leave her alone? "I'm fine," Jane said. "Good night, Mom." "Good night."

Her mother paused, as if about to say something else. Instead she just shook her head, turned out the light and closed the door.

Lying there, Jane could not stop thinking of death. Suddenly, she found herself missing her father with a ferocity she hadn't felt since the days immediately following his death. She wanted so desperately to talk to him, to tell him everything that had happened. Did people who died young commune on the other side? Her father, Shayne, and Connor. People who died before their time, leaving loved ones to years of healing. Years of grief.

Jane's eyes gradually adjusted to the darkness. Her computer chair sat pushed against the desk where she and Lola had left it. Jane threw back the covers and, in the thin light from outside that vaguely warmed her room, she carefully moved the chair to its position in front of her bed. It sat open-armed before her while she scrambled back under the covers.

In time, she fell asleep.

Jane felt the darkness press against her cheek as something rustled in her room. Her eyes fluttered open. It was much darker, her eyes no longer adjusted to the shadows.

A figure of pitch slumped in the chair, as it always did.

"Hi Daddy," she whispered. For a moment, Jane felt infinitely safer. She put her arm up under her head and smiled, watching the shade in the chair.

The form listlessly shifted, gently breathing.

"I miss you so much, Daddy," she said. "I don't know what to do anymore. Things are so messed up. I met this boy..."

The dark figure stood from the chair, turning slowly toward her. Jane held her breath. The faint ghost of a streetlight rimmed the edge of his face, reflecting in his eyes.

"Why don't you give Daddy a kiss?" he said, reaching for her.

She recoiled at the strange voice and when the figure stepped into the light, she saw that it was not her father at all; it was Freddy.

Jane sat up quickly, pushing back against her pillows. "What do you want?" she asked, adrenaline a sour tide in her belly as she fought to sound tougher than she felt.

Freddy reached out, hand hovering briefly over her blankets. He then snatched them off the bed in a single rip, uncovering a blazing pit just below her feet. Jane scrambled back, screaming, as the flames licked the bottom of Freddy's chin. The greasy sinews and muscles of his face gleamed in the fires. When he smiled, his already rotten teeth blackened as the shadows erased his mouth.

The flames gorged on her mattress, reaching for her, and Jane leapt from the bed to the floor, but had no idea where she could go. Freddy was on the side of the bed closest to the door and she was on the opposite side. She backed up against a bookshelf as Freddy closed in on her. In the firelight, she could see that Freddy was shirtless. Between his singed, rotted ribs, maggots roiled in the heavy sacks of his swaying lungs.

"You want to play with me?" he growled. "I'll tell you what, honey. We can play all you like." He took a step closer. "I know plenty of games. And I may not be able to kill you yet, but that doesn't mean we can't... get to know each other."

He lunged for her with his sooty hands.

Never taking her eyes off of him, Jane grabbed a hardback book from her bookshelf and heaved it at him. Freddy ducked, covering his head as the book glanced off his shoulder. Then, he straightened up, scowling, and the book sailed right around back at Jane in a continuous arc. Jane dodged the book just as she heard the shelves rattling ominously behind her. She turned to find all of the books on her shelves wriggling free. One shot out at her, just as she danced away, but it pounded her arm. Jane screamed, holding her arm protectively. She clambered over the flaming bed to the other side of the bedroom. Books shot through the flames, hitting the walls and landing all over the room in blazing piles. One book landed at the foot of her door draperies, which caught fire.

The door! She had a clear shot now. Without even checking to see where Freddy was, she dove for the doorknob and wrenched it open.

That little girl from the gym at school stood in the doorway. She was about six or seven years old and had big, willow-green eyes and long, blonde hair. She wore a cheap pink nightgown that was splattered with blood and other darker fluids. She stared up at Jane,

her gaze vaguely familiar. Blood wept from four even cuts on her face and ran down her neck, staining the collar of her nightie. Beyond, the hallway was not Jane's short, provincial hallway lined with family photographs. It was a long, grungy corridor that stretched to a living room, where the television was blaring the canned laughter of some sitcom. The little girl turned and scampered down the short passage, into the family room.

Feeling suddenly protective of both herself and the little girl, Jane ran after her. "Hey!" she called. "Who are you?"

The little girl said nothing. She continued into the filthy family room. Beer cans, dirty dishes and empty TV dinner trays littered the room. The TV lay on its side, still playing, light flickering from the thick glass. Occasionally, the box would sizzle and spark. Blood soaked the floor and furniture in black streaks and puddles, a trail of gore that led to the prone, contorted body of a thin, pale woman in a pink T-shirt, lying face-first on the carpet. A sticky, black pool soaked the carpet under her chin. Her neck looked as if it had been sliced completely open. Jane couldn't see anything else of her face and didn't want to. The smell alone turned her stomach. She remembered that smell from when her father was bleeding that day before he went to the hospital. She backed away slowly in revulsion, right into Freddy.

"Pay attention!" he hissed into her ear. "There'll be a test later."

Jane flung herself forward, grasping the little girl and pushing her back protectively.

"Awww," Freddy said. "Ain't that sweet?"

The little girl took Jane's hand. "Come on," she said, tugging Jane toward another hallway. "In there."

Trapped in the nightmarish scene, Jane looked from the child to Freddy. She silently chose the child's lead as Freddy laughed, hands planted on his hips.

"In there," he repeated, mockingly. "Yes, in there."

Gripping Jane's hand tightly, the child pulled her into the hallway. Terror dug icy nails into the back of Jane's neck as she reluctantly followed. Horrific smells blossomed from the open door to the bedroom at the hallway's end. Jane gasped as the smells of alcohol,

bile, half-digested food, rot and blood burned her nose. She covered her face, gasping and pinching her nose as her diaphragm convulsed. She held her breath to steady herself.

The girl seemed to want to tell her something. Jane bent down slightly to listen to her. Working small pink lips into a pucker, the little girl breathlessly whispered to Jane, "The monster is dead."

All Jane could see was a bloodied biker boot and a socked foot tangled together in a pair of soiled jeans.

Jane studied the doorway, unsure if she could bring herself to the threshold without retching violently as the fumes yanked at her stomach contents and stung her eyes.

Freddy took her by the shoulders. "Don't you want to meet the rest of the family?" He shoved her into the room.

Jane's free hand flailed, grasping the doorframe to keep from falling on the body that sprawled in a nauseating bath of bodily fluids, glistening intestines bulging from gaps in his doughy, sallow flesh. Something had lathed deep gouges and muscle tears into his flabby arms that were tattooed with cheap blue ink, and his eyes rolled halfway up behind his lids. A handgun lay some feet away, tossed onto a pile of dirty laundry. The room was filthier than the living room, littered with beer bottles kicked from the edge of the king-sized bed against the other piles of trash. The bed's dingy, rumpled sheets were streaked with dark fluids, but the floor sopped up most of the sewage. Everything else was a sticky blur of heavily stained, ragged fabric and loose flaps of skin.

The girl ran over and started kicking the corpse, little fists clenched in childish fury. "Bad, bad, bad, bad," she whispered over and over.

Freddy flashed a look at Jane and made the time honored symbol for madness, inscribing a tight circle in the air beside his temple with one knife blade fingertip. He stepped toward her, his shoulders eclipsing her as she recoiled.

Blindly, Jane bolted for the door, slamming against the frame as she crashed through the opening, and her shoulder sizzled with pain as she ran down the hallway.

What the fuck? she thought. Why is he torturing me? What is it that he wants me to see so badly? Is he trying to break me? Or is he just playing with my sanity until he slaughters me like Connor and Shayne?

Connor and Shayne.

Jane frantically looked for an opening back to her room, pounding the walls with her open palms. The walls were stitched together in an endless surface. No windows. No front door. Just this single, dingy, terrifying room.

There must be some dream opening, she reasoned, something that opens up at my will...

Freddy stood for a beat in the hallway opening, glaring at her. Jane halted her search and cowered against the wall as he then slowly approached her, his eyes drilling into her.

"Why don't you kill me?" Jane asked. Her hands had begun to shake uncontrollably. She tried to still them by placing them flat against the wall.

Freddy leaned in toward her, placing a hand on the wall above her, and she turned her head in revulsion. His putrid breath heated her neck as his nose grazed her ear.

Just as Jane braced herself up against the wall, Freddy ripped the wall away and she fell backward, dropping, shrieking, flailing, into the frictionless darkness.

With a hoarse cry, she bolted upright in bed, clutching something at her chest. As she hyperventilated, she quickly dropped the thing in her arms and the Victorian funeral wreath fell onto the blankets.

SIXTEEN

Brandon sat on a cushy barstool in the basement rec room of Kevin Park's house. Kevin's Korean parents were loaded and their sleek, ultramodern house was huge, packed with every gadget and techno-toy known to man. The rec room had several stand-up video games, an Xbox hooked up to a giant, plasma screen TV with state of the art surround sound, a karaoke machine, and a fully stocked bar, all top shelf, name-brand booze. That night, no one was drinking. Instead, a restaurant grade espresso machine burbled and hissed, struggling to keep the boys' oversized cups filled.

The other boys, the two Daves and Rich Tremont, sat with Kevin on the black leather sectional. Brandon was the only one alone and apart, drawing furiously as if attempting to exorcize demons.

"It's freaky man," Dave C said softly. "I was in this bar, trying to find the pisser. There were all these hallways and I kept getting turned around. I thought someone was following me and then all of a sudden, I was in this kind of... factory or something."

The dreams. They had all been having the dreams. Brandon looked down at the page in his sketchbook. Calavera was fighting for his life against a guy with a burned face and an old-fashioned hat. Brandon had not been able to sleep a wink since the night Connor and Shayne were killed. He woke that night in an icy sweat, still feeling the iron grip of that awful nightmare.

He had been back in Mexico, in Guanajuato. He was running down the hall in the Museum of the Mummies, brown and desiccated corpses all around him. Jane was there, dressed in a skull bikini and high-heeled boots and he was running to catch up with her, to tell her it was dangerous for her to be there. She kept looking back over her shoulder and laughing. When he rounded the corner he came out into a huge, high-ceilinged space like some kind of weird church. A dim and unclear figure stood at the far end of the room and Jane ran toward it with a blissful smile on her face.

Brandon wanted to scream, to tell her to stay away from that dark shape folded into the shadows, but he could not make a sound. The

figure stepped forward into a shaft of dusty light pouring down from a jagged hole in the ceiling and opened his arms. It was that ugly, burned man with his rotten teeth and ragged striped sweater. He smiled as Jane flung herself into his arms. Brandon watched with horror as the sneering man grabbed a handful of her generous ass and bent to kiss her.

As she kissed him, Jane began to slowly mummify. Her perfect alabaster skin wrinkled and darkened. Her hair became dry and fell out in clumps. Her beautiful, dark eyes sank back into her head, leaving empty black pits behind her glasses. Her full curves hung slack on her bones, flesh melting away until she was nothing but a skeleton clad in tough skin like gray beef jerky. The burned man dropped her to the stone floor and she shattered, dust and bones skittering away.

Brandon was filled with crushing and profound emotion that racked him with an almost physical pain. He covered his mouth with his hands and saw that his hands were small and thin. His arms and legs, too, and he realized that he was a child, all the strength and years drained away. He turned to run but the man was on him in a heartbeat, fast as a jungle cat and slashing at him with an Aztec obsidian knife. Agony burned bright across his shoulder where the blade kissed his skin and Brandon twisted away. He ran and the man followed close behind. Down mausoleum hallways and through raw stone corridors, Brandon's heart was screaming in his chest when he came up into a dank cul-de-sac strewn with bones and trash. The man came around the corner slowly, sauntering like he had all the time in the world. Brandon's eyes frantically searched the walls around him for any hope of escape. On his right, he spotted a tiny square opening low down near the floor, nearly hidden by a moldering heap of femurs. He threw himself down on his belly and crawled into the opening. The stone tube he entered was barely big enough for his body but he wriggled in deep like an eel, kicking at the hands that tried to grab his legs and haul him back out. He crawled and crawled through the lightless passageway and as he went, he started to get the awful feeling that the stone tube was getting smaller.

When he first entered, his shoulders did not touch the sides, but now they did, lightly at first and then tighter and tighter. He felt the roof of the tunnel against his head and suddenly, he found he could go no further. He tried to back up and found that he was stuck fast. He could hear the soft sound of someone slithering down the tube behind him, getting closer and closer. Panic shrieked through his body as he struggled to breathe, trapped in the cold stone embrace of the tunnel's walls. He was wedged in tight as a cork and he could hear the ugly man's breath echoing close behind him, too close.

"Brandon," the man whispered. "Looks like you've gotten yourself into a tight spot."

His hand closed around Brandon's ankle and he screamed—

—and he was in his bed, his mother shaking him awake. She was dressed in her red and gold hotel uniform, ready to leave for work. It was four in the morning.

"What's the matter, *mijo*?" she asked. "You were screaming."

He let his mother hug him, too numb to hug back. When she asked him what the nightmare had been about, he lied and told her he did not remember. When his mother pulled her hand away from the embrace, her palm was wet with blood.

She took him in the bathroom and cleaned the long gash across his shoulder and then they searched the bed for whatever had caused the wound. There was nothing.

He wanted more than anything to call Jane, to make sure she was okay, but he knew that, even if she were awake, she would not take his call.

Jane's refusal to believe him about the incident with Rose and her subsequent cold shoulder was like a constant twisting knife inside his heart. As he sat there at Kevin's, listening to the other guys tell their disturbingly similar dreams, all Brandon could think about was Jane. He sketched her, walking away from Calavera while the burly wrestler sat with his masked face in his hands.

"I don't know what the fuck is going on," Rich said. "But I'm gonna have another cup of rocket fuel. I'm not taking any chances."

Rich was reddish-blond and thickly freckled, six feet even and a solid, shredded two hundred and ten pounds without an ounce of fat

on his big, rangy frame. He was the biggest guy on the team but didn't fit any of the usual big guy stereotypes. He was neither dumb nor easygoing. He was extroverted and hyper, often using his wickedly sarcastic sense of humor to cover up a deep-seated insecurity. That day he seemed quieter than usual, pale and shaken.

"Sleep is for pussies," Kevin agreed, taking a deep slug from his own cup.

"Listen," Dave W said. "Have you guys ever heard of Freddy Krueger?"

"Who?" Kevin asked.

"Freddy Krueger," Dave W said. "He's like, the boogeyman, but worse." Dave W's simple, butter-bland features were pinched with genuine fear, dark eyebrows drawn together. "He gets into your dreams and if he gets you, you die for real."

"Quit talking shit, you pussy," the smaller Dave said, running an anxious hand through his short, sandy hair and standing up, turning his back on his teammates.

"I'm serious," Dave W said. "He killed all these kids up in Springwood. Killed them in their dreams."

"So what are you saying?" Kevin asked, leaning forward and frowning. "Are you saying this burned guy we all dreamed about is Freddy Krueger and he can really kill us? You think he killed Connor?"

Kevin was the polar opposite of Rich, lean and wiry at five foot seven inches and one hundred and thirty-eight pounds. He was movie star handsome, intelligent and ambitious. An excellent technical wrestler, he was second only to the late Connor Hall.

"I don't know," Dave W said. "But don't you think it's weird that we all dreamed the same guy?"

"Well," Kevin replied, "there's weird like us all having similar dreams and then there's weird like some supernatural boogeyman trying to kill us all while we sleep."

"But you know Connor didn't kill Shayne," Dave W said. "He was totally pussy-whipped by that bitch. He wouldn't squeak out a fart without her permission. I mean, we used to tease him about it and shit, but the truth is he really loved her."

"I see your point," Kevin said. "But I don't see what that has to do with our weird dreams."

"Don't you see?" Dave W said. "It's Freddy, man. I know it's him. He killed Connor and Shayne and now he's after us."

"Look," Dave C said, voice tight and hostile. "Just shut the fuck up with that spooky shit."

"All right man," Kevin said. "Just take it easy. Things are weird enough without us at each other's throats."

"Hey Kev," Rich said. "You put up that new footage yet?"

"Yeah, of course," Kevin said, smiling, clearly relieved at the change of subject. "Let me get my laptop."

Brandon continued to ignore them, sketching with angry black strokes. Fedora hat, burned face, rotten sneer and around him, dozens of butchered corpses.

"Check this out, Davey-boy," Kevin said. "This ought to improve your mood."

Brandon did not look at the little screen. He just drew, detailing a spill of organs from a split-open abdomen and that burned man hovering over the corpse, wide and ragged bat-like wings sprouting from his back like some kind of hideous demon. His mouth gaped, filled with needle teeth and skinny, strangely-jointed fingers reached out to pluck some greasy tidbit from the corpse below. Brandon sketched silently, allowing the conversation in the room to wash over him.

"Oh shit, man, there's Connor," Rich said.

"Weird," Dave W said.

"Man, that girl was amazing though, huh?" Kevin said. "What a slut."

"Un fucking real," Rich said.

"I love this part," Kevin said. "Watch this."

"Damn," Dave C said. "I still can't get Lisa to do that."

"It's so weird seeing Connor, though," Dave W said.

"What was that chick's name again?" Dave C asked. "That new chick? Damn she was hot. We gotta get her to do a sequel."

"Rose," Kevin said and Brandon's head snapped around.

Brandon left his sketchbook and went over to where his teammates huddled around the laptop. When he saw what they were watching, he knew he had to go see Jane.

He grabbed his jacket and ran.

"Hey, Brandon?" Kevin called after him.

"Jeez, what the fuck is his problem?" Rich asked.

"Man, Kevin, you missed your money shot," Dave C said. "Go back."

After Brandon's unexplained exit, the boys watched a few more oldies but goodies from Kevin's archives and then settled in to play Resident Evil. Kevin's father was off in Seoul again on mysterious and complicated businessman-type stuff but Kevin's mother had appeared around midnight, gently chiding the boys not to stay up too late. They waved her away with promises of "just one more game" and she withdrew with a wise, boys-will-be-boys smile on her face. Kevin sat back, watching the carnage on the screen as the two Daves battled side by side. His eyelids were leaden, exhaustion aching in his bones as he struggled to stay awake. But as the zombies began to overwhelm the two Daves Kevin found himself drifting off.

In his dream, he was in a porno movie. He sat on a huge round bed, surrounded by gorgeous babes. Several girls from school were there, including that Taiwanese exchange student who Kevin had been getting nowhere with for the past month. She was making out with Kayla Jens, only Kayla had her long hair again and was looking unbelievably hot in this little, leopard print teddy and spike heels. There were bright lights all around and the director was in shadow behind a huge camera, waving his arms and calling action. But then, just as things started to get really good, the director yelled, "Cut."

"What?" Kevin asked. He thought he was doing a great job.

"God damn it," the director said. "Do I have to do everything myself?" He came out from behind the camera and Kevin saw it was that guy. That horrible burned guy. Kevin sucked in a deep gasp of air and tried to turn and run but the women around him grabbed

him and held him down. With supernatural strength, the women turned him over onto his stomach and he started screaming as the burned guy walked up to the bed and pulled out a huge butcher knife.

"This is gonna hurt," he said, bringing the knife down and laying open Kevin's back in a single sweep from neck to tailbone. White hot agony eclipsed Kevin's senses as the man pushed his dirty hand deep into the cut, fingers scrabbling roughly through Kevin's torso and out into his left arm. The other hand followed and Kevin could feel the invading hands inside him, pushing impossibly through him and down into his hands, all the way to the tips of his fingers as if he were a giant pair of gloves. He could feel the man wiggling his fingers inside him and Kevin's fingers moved too. It was as if the man was slipping into Kevin's skin like a wetsuit, controlling his every move as he felt his pain-wracked body lurch to its feet, completely against his will. He tried to scream but all that came out of his mouth was a deep and vicious laugh.

"I'm gonna make more coffee," Dave W said, turning reluctantly away from the action on the screen. "Kevin, you want some?" He turned to see Kevin slumped on the sofa, asleep.

"Shit," Dave W said. "Wake up, man."

Rich hit pause on the game and turned back to the sleeping Kevin.

"Is he out?" Dave C asked. "Come on, Kev, wake up!"

Dave W shook Kevin's shoulder and Kevin's hand shot up, gripping Dave W's throat. Kevin's eyes were closed, skittering back and forth beneath his lids.

"Fuck," Rich said, dropping the game controller and rushing to Dave W's aid. He struggled to pry Kevin's fingers off his friend's throat but they were locked tight. Dave W's mouth opened and closed like a fish, eyes bulging.

"Kevin, what the fuck are you doing?" Rich struggled with Kevin's immovable arm. "Stop it, man, you're killing him."

"Look at him," Dave C said. "He's asleep."

"Kevin," Rich yelled. "Fuck, man, wake up."

"Hit 'im," Dave C said.

Rich looked back at Dave C. "But..."

"Just do it," Dave C said.

Dave W was turning purple, eyes rolled up into his head. But Kevin was Rich's best friend. They had known each other since grade school. In all those years, Kevin had never let Rich down. Kevin covered for him with whatever girl he was currently dating whenever he wanted some extra-curricular activity. He helped Rich maintain his B average so he would not get kicked off the team. Anything Rich needed, any time day or night, he could always count on Kevin. Growing up, Rich probably spent more time at Kevin's house than with his own fucked-up, dysfunctional gang of drunks and felons that could be called a family only by virtue of their shared DNA. Now, looking down at his friend's weirdly serene expression, he was supposed to find it in himself to hit the guy who had hooked him up with the first chick he ever had.

"Aw, fuck," Rich said and let Kevin have it in the face.

He might as well have been hitting the heavy bag at school. He hit Kevin again and blood streamed from Kevin's nose but there was absolutely no reaction.

Dave C grabbed one of Kevin's wrestling trophies off a nearby shelf and used the heavy base to smash Kevin in the side of the head. A massive purple knot blossomed under his scalp, but his head barely moved a quarter inch to the left and then straightened up again, grip never wavering. He stood, raising Dave W off his feet with a single hand. It was impossible, as the younger boy had nearly fifty pounds on Kevin. Rich cursed and kicked Kevin in the shin as hard as he could. They heard the wet crunch of bone breaking as Kevin's leg bent horribly back against the knee, but he did not react at all, standing solid as a tree as Dave W's body shuddered and went limp.

"Holy shit," Rich said as Kevin let Dave W's body drop and turned to Rich.

Kevin's eyes were still closed but he moved toward Rich as if he could see him.

"Wake up, man," Rich said, shaking, palms up. "Come on Kevin, wake up."

At that point, Dave C hollered and charged, grabbing a corkscrew off the bar and tackling Kevin from behind. He stabbed the corkscrew into Kevin's back again and again. Kevin slammed the back of his head into Dave C's face and gripped his wrist, breaking it like a pencil and driving the corkscrew into Dave C's eye.

Dave C screamed like a girl, blood gushing from his eye socket as he staggered back, tripping over the wire from the Xbox. On screen, flashing words spelled: "GAME OVER."

Rich backed away, nauseous horror gripping him as Kevin turned and took a step toward him. His slack, dreaming face reminded Rich of the zombies from the video game. Then, when he thought things couldn't possibly get worse, Kevin's mother appeared in the doorway. She was tiny and pale in her monogrammed silk bathrobe, her face glistening with night cream. Mrs Park had practically raised Rich herself, putting Band-Aids on his knees, making sure he did his homework and never thinking twice about putting out a fifth place setting at her dinner table. She used to put a reassuring hand on Rich's arm and call him her redheaded stepchild as he stood there as big and alien as a cuckoo next to Kevin and his little sister, her own, two, dark-haired offspring. When Rich got his DUI that spring, he had been more ashamed when Mrs Park found out than when his own, drunken bitch of a mother did. When Mrs Park saw the sprawling bodies, she gasped, shouted in Korean and ran to Kevin.

"Mrs Park," Rich warned. "Don't ..."

Kevin picked up a bottle of Kettel One off the bar and smashed it into his mother's head, his face still calm and expressionless. She screamed and collapsed to the floor and something snapped inside Rich. He unthinkingly charged at Kevin, desperately trying to take him down. It was like throwing his shoulder into a parking meter. He felt his arm dislocate in its socket, a sledgehammer of pain crashing through his body and he rolled up on the ground like a pillbug, writhing in agony.

Kevin turned to his fallen mother and began to kick her in the head, stomping her face with the heel of his shoe. Her screams

tapered off into slushy gurgles and Rich lost any courage he might have had. He scrambled to his feet and ran.

Kevin turned and ran after him, swift and unerring even with his eyes closed. Rich threw a long table into Kevin's path to slow him down, but he effortlessly batted it aside like it was nothing. He caught up to Rich in the kitchen. In the day the Park kitchen was a bright sunny place where Rich and Kevin often sat drinking homemade spicy persimmon punch and bullshitting about chicks. Now it was dark and empty, trees making sinister shadows through the open blinds.

Grabbing a knife from the counter, Rich held it out toward the advancing Kevin. Rich was crying now.

"Stay back, man," he blubbered. "Stay the fuck away from me."

Kevin lunged at Rich. Rich howled and plunged the knife into Kevin's chest. Unfazed, Kevin's hands reached for Rich's throat. Rich stumbled backward and scrambled up onto the marble countertop, desperate to get away. He yanked open cabinets, tossing down stacks of dishes and glasses into Kevin's path as he ran the length of the counter, towards the back door. He almost made it when Kevin's hand closed around his ankle and Rich fell, crashing hard to the cold marble tile. Razor-sharp shards of porcelain and glass sliced into his palms and chest as he struggled to crawl, stunned and barely conscious as pain overwhelmed him. He could not get away.

Kevin kicked him onto his back and set his knees down on Rich's shoulders, grinding Rich's back into the broken glass.

"Please," Rich begged, his voice crushed down to a pathetic whisper. "Kevin, please."

He saw a strange kind of conflict shudder through Kevin's face, twitches of emotion batting under the smooth sleeping features. Then Kevin's hands locked around Rich's throat and Kevin opened his mouth wide. A deep, terrible laugh rolled out, breath hot and awful like rot and charred meat, but Rich swore he heard something else beneath the laugh. Something like a distant, tormented scream.

Rich fought and struggled fiercely, but it was like trying to move a building. His consciousness dimmed as he fought for air and any tiny glimmer of Kevin that might have been there was gone as he dug his

thumbs into the soft spot above Rich's Adam's apple. Blackness swallowed Rich and he was almost grateful.

When Rich was dead, Kevin pulled the knife from his own chest and went to find his little sister.

SEVENTEEN

Seven, eight, gonna stay up late...

Jane lay awake. The last thing on her agenda that night was to fall asleep. She focused on how she would continue fixing up her room, frame the death portrait Lola shot, finish the dresser, maybe paint the ceiling a deep, midnight blue. These mundane thoughts fought like stern chaperones to keep the fear from wrapping itself around her like an overeager suitor—the fear and guilt that would disable every rational thought if she allowed them free reign. But it was a losing battle. Every wall in her life had been torn down, exposing her to the horrors that her brick and mortar world would have never revealed. Now there was nothing but this fear drilling into her stomach and a monster behind her eyelids that could kill just as easily as if he were on the other side of her lashes. Of course she had to focus on the fucking walls. She had to pretend that they would not come down, that Freddy was not going to punch a fist through them like flimsy butcher's paper.

At least, not while her eyes were open.

What was he trying to do to her? Playing with her? Tormenting her? Or was he trying to show her something? And what did he mean when he said he could not kill her yet? Once he fulfilled Rose's mad hit list, would she be next? Would he stop there?

She felt particularly terrible for possibly bringing any trouble to her mother. They fought at times, but her mother did not deserve any of this. She went through hell when Jane's dad died and was only now starting to really recover, to really stretch a little, to put down roots. It had been so long since she seemed genuinely happy.

If only Jane could read. Or something. At least her mother went to bed some time ago, lying in the blissful blankets of mundane dreams, sloughing off the calluses of stress with each deep sigh. The worst she had to fear was losing another job in this sorry economy. But even then, if worse comes to worse, they could always go live with Jane's

grandparents. There was nothing that could truly harm her mother in any appreciable way short of major disability...

Or the death of Jane.

So, it wasn't so much that she feared for herself. Jane feared for what would happen to her mother if anything happened to her one and only daughter. This, she realized, made her deeply uncool. She was supposed to hate her mother like her peers hated theirs, but she couldn't bring herself to do it.

Tink... tink-tink...

Jane's heart spiked into her throat. What the hell was that? Check the blankets: real. Check the wall up above her headboard: real. Check her eyes: open.

Tink-tink-tink...

Someone was tapping at her window. That meant whoever it was had to have scaled the fence or busted the gate lock to get into the backyard. They might not have been living in a big city, but those instincts never left Jane's mother. Screw bolts in the window track and dead bolts on the doors. Locks, locks, lock the car door, lock the house, lock your computer screen. Whoever was tapping at her window had gotten past quite a chunky lock.

Jane just lay there paralyzed, not sure what to do. She carefully let her gaze drift to the window, which was on the same wall as the headboard. Maybe it was Lola. Or Amber. Maybe they had tried to call. Jane considered rolling out of bed to turn on her cell. Damn the light! It would give away any movement.

"It's me..."

Brandon!

"Come on, Jane. I know you're awake."

How many times did she need to tell him she would not see him. She never wanted to see him again. She couldn't stand to be near him, not just because of what he had done to Rose, but also because of the awful creeping conviction that if he was close enough to touch, Jane would not be able to resist his lies.

"Jane, come on. Please? I have to talk to you." His voice was thick and broken. He deserved nothing but scorn, yet she still felt that

awful tug in her heart. He sounded bad, shaken and desperate and she held up her anger like a shield, reminding herself of his betrayal.

Rolling out of bed, Jane slid across the room to the window. She didn't bother to open her drapes, but she did stand close enough so that he could hear her.

"Go away, Brandon. I don't ever want to talk to you again."

"Jane," he said, pressing his nose to the glass and resting both hands at the base of the frame. His shoulders came just above the bottom of the window and he cast a distorted shadow through the drapes and sheers. "There's something you need to see! It's important."

"Forget it," Jane responded. "Go away before you wake up my mom."

"I have proof that Rose wasn't raped."

Jane hesitated as the words sank in.

"What do you mean?"

"Please, Jane." He sounded choked up, close to tears. "Someone's after me. Me and some of the other guys on the team. He can get into our dreams. I think he killed Connor and Shayne."

He paused and Jane's heart was pounding in her chest.

"I don't want to die with you thinking I'm some kind of fucking rapist," Brandon said. "Please, just let me show you and then I swear I'll never bother you again."

The possibility that Jane was wrong—not just wrong, but deceived—flung open the door to teeming panic. What proof could he possibly have? What would she have to see to prove that Rose was not raped? Questions were still stomping around inside Jane's head from Rose's bizarre behavior and while Jane stayed skeptical, unshakable doubt had wormed its way in to her heart.

"Okay. I'm letting you through the window, but you have to be quiet," she said. "Really quiet, okay?"

"Thank you," he said. "Thank God."

Sweeping back the drapes, Jane revealed a very haggard-looking Brandon. He had dark shadows beneath his eyes and sweat clung to his face in spite of the cool night. His eyebrows crowded together in worry. She worked at the bolt screw in her window, then slid open

the glass. The chill pressed through the weave of the screen, mingling with the metallic smell, a simple, happy smell, one of Jane's favorites. It seemed so out of place on this terrible night. She pinched the tabs on the screen and pulled up hard. In one try, the screen loosened from its track and Brandon took hold of it from outside. He lowered it to the ground, leaning it against the house.

"How're you going to get up here?" Jane asked.

"You got something to lay on the track so I don't cut my hands?"

Jane looked around and found a still-damp towel from her morning shower. She folded it in two and laid it over the window track. Brandon then gripped the window ledge and jumped, his feet scraping against the wall. He got a leg up and in, and climbed over without too much trouble.

They stood about two feet apart for a few moments, just looking at each other. Listening. Jane's gaze drifted toward the door. No noises from down the hallway. Her mother did take sleeping pills sometimes, the same pills Jane had snagged for the night at the factory. It was a good bet that if her mom didn't wake up from that ruckus, she had been knocked out chemically. Still, relief that her mother would not wake did not dispel the war of conflicting emotions inside her belly as Brandon reached out to touch her arm, then pulled his hand back, dark eyes filled with anguished hope.

"Can you get online in here?" he asked.

She didn't know what she was expecting him to say, but that wasn't it. It took a second for her to recover and nod, gesturing toward her computer.

Brandon watched silently as her machine booted up XP and a world-class security system and then wordlessly sat down and took over the keys.

"DSL?" he asked.

She nodded, indicating the little box with its winking green lights.

"Good," he said. "It's gonna be a big file." He logged on to the wrestling team's website, a simple affair with scores, stats and photos.

"Kevin's been using his webcam to secretly record all the girls he's slept with for the past year. He puts up the files here on the site for

all the guys on the team."

Brandon scrolled through the pictures of the wrestlers until he came to Kevin Park, moving the cursor over the photo until it touched his crotch and turned into a pointing finger, indicating a hidden link. Brandon clicked and was taken to a plain, white page with a list of girls' names followed by the letters mpg. Jane couldn't help but notice Amber's name on that list.

"I saw Kevin's laptop in the room that night with Rose but I forgot all about it until tonight. I called a hundred times, but I knew the only way to get through to you was to come here."

He scrolled down the list. The name on the bottom of the list was Rose.mpg

"Just watch this, okay," Brandon said. "Then I'll go." He took a deep breath and then clicked the file named after Rose.

Jane waited for the file to open with a cold feeling of dread. Eventually a rectangle appeared on the screen with a toolbar at the bottom. Brandon clicked the sideways triangle that stood for play. The image resolved into a huddle of broad, T-shirt clad backs. The quality was not bad, but the room was dim, making it difficult to sort out the details of what she was seeing. Jane did recognize members of the wrestling team, including several of those named in Rose's hit list of the condemned. Then suddenly the male bodies parted, revealing Rose. She lay back on an unmade bed, her breasts spilling over the neckline of her strappy dress. She was smiling, green eyes burning.

"Hey, Brandon," Connor's voice called. "Where you going?" He was clearly quite inebriated.

"I'm outta here, man," the on-screen Brandon said as he came into the frame, looking down at the camera and back at Rose. "This is not my thing."

"Don't be a pussy, you fucking wetback," Connor said, punching Brandon hard in the shoulder. "That anaconda you got there camera-shy or what?"

Brandon shook his head, face hard and unreadable. The handsome Asian face of Kevin Park loomed suddenly large in the frame, fiddling with the camera.

"Brandon's afraid to be recorded," Kevin said, moving the camera to a higher location in a vertiginous shuffle. The image resolved again, now dominated by Connor's face. His cheeks were flushed, eyes glassy. Kevin's voice continued off-screen. "He thinks *La Migra* will see it and he'll get deported."

"Whoa! Hang on," Connor said, looking back over his shoulder. "Yeah."

He stepped aside, revealing Rose on the bed. She was peeling down the top of her dress, her breasts jiggling softly in the cups of her lace bra. Her milk-white arms and chest were crisscrossed with scars. Some old and pale and some still oozing fresh.

"Freaky," Connor said.

In the background, Jane could faintly hear Brandon's retreating footsteps and the slam of the bedroom door under the whistles and catcalls.

Rose reached behind herself and unsnapped her bra, pushing her breasts upward and together and licking her lips. Connor strode forward, grinning and began fumbling with his belt. All around him, his teammates quickly followed suit.

"That's it, boys," Rose said, reaching into Connor's open fly. "You know what I need."

Jane hit pause, freezing Rose as she leaned down toward Connor, lips parted and green eyes narrow and sly. She was not held down, not being beaten or forced to participate in any way. A cold rage boiled inside Jane. "I've seen enough," she said.

Brandon shook his head.

"No, wait," he said, hitting fast forward. "There's something else you need to see."

The images on the screen were creepy and surreal as they sped along, headless male bodies and grinding flesh moving unnaturally fast through endless, torturous combinations. And in the middle of it all, Rose, ecstatic and howling. Sometimes eclipsed by muscular legs and backs, sometimes naked and splayed as a vivisected rabbit, but unquestionably thrilled to be there.

"Here," Brandon said, pausing as an anonymous male ass moved aside to reveal Rose's upside-down face hanging off the edge of the

bed. Her candy apple hair was dark with sweat, pink cheeks glossed with spit. "Listen."

"You like that don't you, bitch?" said a deep male voice Jane didn't recognize.

"Yes," Rose intoned as if hypnotized. "I'm a bad, dirty little girl."

Her voice was dull and monotone, but her eyes were wild and overflowing with poisonous green lunacy. She had that same expression that night in the factory, clutching Freddy's sweater.

"She's crazy, man," Brandon said, clicking stop and closing the window. "I don't know what is going on with that girl but I tell you there is something very, very wrong with her."

Jane was totally appalled, racked with guilt. She covered her mouth.

"Now do you believe me?" Brandon asked.

Looking at him was almost physically painful. He might have died because of Jane, and could still die the moment he closed his eyes, all because she did not believe him.

"Brandon," she whispered behind her palm, tears spilling down her cheeks. "Oh my God, Brandon. I am so sorry."

He pulled her into his arms and the whole story of the night at the factory came gushing out of her like retching up poison. She sobbed uncontrollably into his shoulder and he listened, stroking her hair with shaking hands.

"Jesus," he said softly. "What are we going to do?"

Jane pulled back from his embrace and forcibly composed herself. Collapsing into a girly puddle wasn't going to solve anything.

"Okay look," she said, angrily wiping tears from her face. "First we need to find out more about Rose so we can figure out how to stop her. We can Google her name and see if anything comes up." She paused. "I keep having these nightmares about a bloody little girl with Rose's eyes. I think it was Freddy who killed her parents."

"Damn," Brandon said.

Jane brought up Google. She entered Rose's name in the Advanced Search page and pressed return. There were many, many pages of entries. She tried the News link, but it brought up nothing useful. Going back to the web results, Jane decided to narrow the search.

"Let's assume that there was some kind of murder," she said. "I'm going to use 'Gibson' and 'murder' in separate parameters. Let's see what comes up. I mean, if something happened, it was twelve years ago and *Deja News* was picking up things, what? Fourteen years ago? It'll be there somewhere."

"You are brilliant," Brandon said.

Jane blushed and clicked Search, but this time a different set of pages appeared. Together, she and Brandon picked through each set of links until one came up that didn't have to do with Mel Gibson. She then berated herself for not having put "Mel" in the "without" field. It was from a five year-old newsgroup discussion on alt.true-crime. Jane pulled up the thread and together they read each post until they hit gold.

An author had copied and pasted a news article into one of the posts about the unsolved murder of Laurie Gibson and her boyfriend, Ed Parker. They lived together in a depressed neighborhood on the outskirts of Bakersfield. Both Gibson and Parker had a long history of drug abuse and domestic violence. The details in the AP wire, as copied by the author of the newsgroup post, lined up perfectly with what Jane remembered from her dream—including and especially the presence of seven year-old Rose Gibson at the scene of their extremely violent deaths. The child was found in the house, her nightgown splattered with blood and four parallel cuts on her cheek. There was a lively debate between the posters as to whether or not the killings were linked to some other well-known killer at the time or if it was drug related. The debate was cross-posted to alt.killers.serial, where a similar discussion occurred, although lots of people complained loudly that the topic didn't belong in their newsgroup at all. The discussion had happened five years ago, but the event was almost exactly twelve years ago.

"It was Freddy," Jane said under her breath. "Freddy killed those people."

"But why?" Brandon asked.

"I don't know. Many of his victims had connections to the people who originally killed him." Jane thought for a moment and then counted quickly on her fingers. "Laurie Gibson had a seven year-old

child." Jane shook as she realized the math added up to something much bigger. "She could have been old enough to have been a child of one of the original parents who killed Freddy."

"Isn't that kind of young?"

"If she got pregnant when she was maybe eighteen or so, she could easily be a mom by then. The house in my dream was no mansion, which makes sense if she's a teen mom living on nothing. Let's see what we can find."

She now entered "Laurie Gibson" in the Google Advanced Search exact phrase field and clicked the "Search" button. Nothing came up except for that one mention in the newsgroup discussion they had already read. However, Jane got an idea.

"There must be obituaries."

"But don't you have to get those on microfiche?" Brandon asked. "That's the only way they store newspapers."

"Maybe newspapers, but not public records," Jane countered.

She quickly navigated to the county recorder's department for Laurie Gibson's place of death. Sure enough, the county recorder had archived all the obituaries for every resident in the last twenty years. The site was painfully slow, but Jane eventually coaxed out Laurie Gibson's obituary. She was survived by her daughter, Rose. But it was Laurie Gibson's place of birth that stunned Jane. Springwood, California. More than that, she had grown up on Elm Street.

Jane steadied herself, rubbing her temples. "I bet her grandmother was one of the parents that killed Freddy," she said.

She then looked at Brandon, and she could see the panic sprinting back and forth behind his eyes as he read. "It's him. It's really fuckin' him!" Brandon whispered. "Jane, this guy is after me."

"I know," she said, clenched with guilt. "But we'll find a way to stop him."

"How? No one ever has!"

"We've got to start by stopping Rose," she replied. "We'll find her first thing in the morning."

A powerful knock on the front door echoed through the house and Jane jumped, gripping Brandon's arm.

"Shit," Jane said. "Who the hell could that be?"

She lifted a corner of the curtains and red and blue light washed across her face. Cops.

"Fuck," Brandon said. "What the hell do they want?"

More knocking, louder this time and Jane heard her mother stumble grumpily out of bed, making her way toward the door.

"Get in there," Jane said, pushing Brandon backward toward her closet.

"What...?"

Jane heard the front door open on the chain. "Can I help you?" Jane's mother's voice said from the hall. As tired as she must have been, her voice was cold and wary.

Jane swept aside the heavy wall of dresses and backed Brandon into the closet. She held a finger to her lips, closed the doors on him and ran to press her ear to the bedroom door.

"I'll need to see some identification," Jane heard her mom say. Then a pause and, "Just a moment please."

Amazingly, Jane heard her mom pick up the phone.

"Yes, hello," Jane's mother said. "I have two gentlemen at my door who claim to be police officers. Their names are Rodriguez and Miller."

Jane silently cheered her mom as she read the badge numbers into the phone.

"I see," her mother said. "Thank you very much."

Jane was disappointed to hear the chain disengage and the door open. They must have checked out.

"Ma'am," a male voice said. "We need to speak to your daughter about her boyfriend Brandon Ortiz."

"Do you have any idea what time it is?" Jane's mother said. "It's a school night."

"I'm sorry ma'am," the other voice said. "We wouldn't be here if it wasn't important."

"My daughter broke up with that boy several days ago," Jane's mother replied, "They had some kind of fight on Friday night. She hasn't seen him since."

"Do you have any idea what their disagreement was about?"

"No," her mother said. "I have no idea."

"I'm sorry ma'am, but we are still going to have to speak to her."

Jane took a deep breath and jumped back in the bed, pulling the covers up to her chin and feigning sleep.

"I don't see why this can't wait until morning," Jane's mother said, her voice getting louder as they approached her door.

Shit, she thought suddenly. The screen.

The window was still open, the screen sitting outside against the house. There was no way to reach the screen now, but she ran to the window and slid it shut as quietly as she could, fumbling with the bolts as her mother's tentative knock sounded on her bedroom door.

"Honey?" her mother called.

Jane's fingers were shaking as she crammed the bolts back in place and dove back into her bed.

"Jane?" The door opened, light from the hallway spilling over Jane's flushed face.

"Jeez, Mom," Jane said, sitting up in bed. "You scared me."

"Jane," she said softly, gesturing to her left with her chin. "There are police here to see you."

"Police?"

"Jane DeHaan?" the lower of the two male voices called. "I'm sorry for the late hour, but we need to ask you some questions."

"Just a second," Jane got out of bed and pulled on a dressing gown.

Shooting a last desperate glance at the closed closet, she went out into the hallway.

The two cops were in regular clothes, one tall and heavysset and the other slight and hyperactive with eyes that seemed to bounce all over the room, cataloguing everything.

"I'm Detective Miller," the hyper one said. "This here's my partner Rodriguez."

The taller cop nodded a silent greeting.

"Have you seen Brandon Ortiz tonight?" the hyper cop asked.

Jane frowned and shook her head. "No, why?"

"Miss DeHaan," the taller guy said. "A brutal, multiple murder has been committed at the home of Martin and Sue Park. Several people are dead, including their son Kevin. Mrs Park was severely beaten

and is currently in critical condition at Mercy Hospital. With head trauma that's extensive, even if she eventually comes out of the coma, she's looking at moderate to severe brain damage. It doesn't look good." He squinted at Jane. "Their eleven year-old daughter Kelly is missing. A copious quantity of blood was found in the girl's room, but no body."

"Your boyfriend's sketchbook was found at the scene," Miller added. "The drawings were... very violent."

Jane blanched, collapsing into a chair. She pictured Kevin's face on the video file, smiling and teasing Brandon. And his mother? The little girl? They were not on Rose's list! Jane was horrified by what they had unleashed.

"You think Brandon is responsible?" Jane asked in a tiny, breathless voice.

"Your mom said you and Brandon fought on Friday the seventeenth," Rodriguez said. "Can you tell us what that fight was about?"

"Did he get rough with you?" Miller asked.

Jane shook her head numbly, forcing a lie between her cold lips. "He cheated on me," she said.

Jane's mother's eyes went wide.

"Was he angry that you ended the relationship?" Rodriguez asked.

"Was his behavior threatening in any way?" Miller asked.

"Brandon would never hurt anyone," Jane said, guts loose and boiling.

"I see," Rodriguez said.

"Well," Miller said, fishing a card from an inner pocket, "if you think of anything else..." He handed the card to Jane.

"Oh, and one more thing," he said, quick little eyes burrowing into Jane.

"What?" she asked, pulling her dressing gown tighter around herself.

"He's not here now, is he?"

Jane's mother stood. "Don't be ridiculous," she said. "My daughter does not have male guests at this hour."

"Is that right?" Miller asked, eyes never leaving Jane's.

All the fury that had been building up inside slopped over and she clenched her fists. "Fuck you," she said.

"Jane," her mom gasped.

"No," Jane continued. "I resent the implication that I am sexually active, which for your information I am not. I went on one date with the boy in question. One date. He kissed me and I stopped him. He wanted to go farther and when I wouldn't let him, he found someone who would. End of story. If you would like to search my bedroom for gentleman callers lurking under the bed, you are welcome to do so, but if not, then kindly take your sleazy questions elsewhere and leave me alone."

She turned on her heel and stormed out of the room.

"I'm sorry," Jane heard her mother say. "I'll talk to her."

"It's okay ma'am," Rodriguez said. "Just let us know if Brandon Ortiz comes around or makes any attempt to contact your daughter. We feel her life might be in danger."

You don't know the half of it, Jane thought.

It took nearly a half hour to calm her mother down and get her to go back to bed. When Jane finally let Brandon out of her closet, he was pale and shaken. He had only heard fragments of the conversation and when Jane filled him in he sat down on the edge of her bed, pale and silent.

"It was Freddy," Brandon said. "I know it was."

"I believe you, Brandon," Jane said, putting her arms around him.

He pulled her close. "Look, I don't want to freak you out or anything," he said. "This isn't exactly how I had hoped to do this, but I have to tell you..." He paused. His voice was tight and cracking. "I love you, Jane. Whatever happens, I need you to know that."

Jane looked up at him, at the torment and potent emotion in his dark eyes, and she knew she loved him too. It was nothing like the slow, thoughtful courtship she had always dreamed of, but there was no denying the way she felt. Like her friendship with Lola, it was that same intense fast-forward intimacy forged during times of danger, only with Brandon, it was laced with potent desire and turned up to eleven. They were in for the fight of their lives and might be killed the second they dozed. There was no time to play hard to get.

"I love you, too, Brandon," she said, words gushing out like blood.

"When you wouldn't talk to me," Brandon said, "when you looked at me with so much hatred in your eyes, I wanted to die. I've never been so scared in my life and you're still all I can think about." He gripped her hand. "I'll fight to the death for you, Jane. I won't let him touch you. Together we can stop this madness and send that ugly fucker back to hell where he belongs."

Jane didn't know who initiated the kiss; it just happened, mad, desperate passion racing through her veins as she pressed against him, sliding inexorably down that rabbit hole again, faster than ever. He was unbuttoning her nightie, mouth on her breasts and she gasped, fingers clutching at his back and pulling his T-shirt up over his smooth, shaven head. His hands slid over her belly, caressing her hips. The thin fabric of her nightie rode up as his hands stroked her thighs and she lay back, allowing her legs to fall open as his mouth moved slowly downward.

In that moment, everything went away. The fear, the guilt, the anxiety, the body-conscious shyness; everything, all swept away in the powerful waves of pleasure that washed over her. She struggled to remain silent as the delicious new feelings reached a nearly unbearable crescendo and, heel of her hand pressed into her mouth, she surrendered to the tidal rush of sensation.

Giddy with desire and endorphins, she pulled him into her arms, kissing him fiercely and wanting him more than ever. He kissed her back, twining a fist in her hair and then stopped, backing off and looking into her eyes.

"You don't have to do anything more," he said.

She looked up at him. "Yes," she said. "I do."

She pushed him onto his back and pulled her nightgown over her head, straddling him and kissing him again. She was amazed at her sudden passionate aggression as she wrenched open his jeans and reached inside.

"Wait," he sat up and pulled back. "Jane, hang on. Wait just a second, okay?"

"What?" she asked, frowning.

He reached into a pocket and extracted a condom from his wallet. "Are you sure this is what you want?" he asked.

Unable to force words past the desire filling her throat, she nodded. He skinned down his jeans and tore open the little foil packet with his teeth. She watched, fascinated, and as soon as the condom was on, she pushed him down on his back again, gripping him impatiently and guiding him into her.

The pain was sharp and breathtaking, and she gasped, biting down on a small cry. He held her, motionless, barely breathing for what felt like a century. Then he gripped her ass and began to move slowly inside her.

Jane lost all track of time as they made love, slowly at first, then with increasing fervor, her hips mirroring his, tongues intertwined and breath mingling beneath the scented spill of Jane's unbound hair. She could feel the tension building in his body and in the cadence of his breath and she worked her hips harder against him, shattering his resistance as she spoke his name between her teeth, egging him on with words she never thought would pass her lips. A sound like a thick, choked sob coiled in his throat and his climax shuddered through him like summer thunder.

In that moment, Jane was sure that they could win.

EIGHTEEN

In the aftermath of their lovemaking, they lay huddled together under her down comforter, lost in the kind of meaningless but passionate talk shared by lovers since the dawn of time, keeping each other awake until the sun came up.

"How are we gonna get you out of here?" Jane asked. "My mom'll be banging on the door any minute now."

Brandon kissed her neck. "I'll go the way I came," he said. "Meet me in front of the supermarket in half an hour, okay?"

Jane did not want to let him go. It was as if the warm bubble that had enclosed them with that first kiss possessed some magic power to stop time and keep them safe. She did not want to go back to the cold and dangerous 'real world. It seemed horrendously unfair.

She watched him dress, torn between wonder at the unconscious beauty of his body in the thin, gray morning light and a chilly, bone-deep dread at what they would have to face very soon. She kissed him several times as he made his way to the window.

"Half an hour," he said, dropping down into the yard and handing up the screen.

"Right," she said, fitting the screen back into the track and closing the window. She watched him scale the fence with ease and disappear over the other side.

"Jane?" her mom called, knocking tentatively on the door

"Coming Mother," Jane replied, quickly pulling on a plain black skirt and a loose, comfortable T-shirt.

She had her glasses on her face, shoes on her feet and her hair twined into a tight knot in record time. There was no time for makeup or anything but the most basic personal hygiene. There were larger things at stake and if Brandon didn't like the way she looked *au naturel*, that was just too bad.

Her mother was lurking anxiously in the hall. Jane could see she wanted to talk. She brushed past her worried mother with her backpack held up like a shield. "I'm gonna walk to school today," Jane announced.

"No way," her mother replied. "I'm not letting you walk by yourself with that maniac on the loose."

"Mom," Jane said, rolling her eyes. "He's not a maniac. There's no way Brandon killed those people. For all we know he could be dead, too. Anyway, I'll be fine."

"You'll be fine in the car," her mother said. "This is not open for debate. I'm driving you and that's final. Now let's go."

There was absolutely no swaying her. She bullied Jane into the Volvo and when they pulled out of the driveway, Jane noticed an unmarked car as it slid out of its parking spot across the street and started slowly tailing them.

"Shit," Jane said. "I think there's a cop following us."

Jane's mother looked up in the rearview mirror and nodded. "They probably just want to make sure you are safe," she said. "Those detectives said your life could be in danger."

"Yeah, right," Jane said. "I'm sure they are deeply concerned with my well-being."

She knew what they really wanted. They wanted her to lead them to Brandon. Her guts twisted with anxious frustration as they passed the supermarket. It was very crowded with moms and children and shopping carts and she couldn't see Brandon, but she knew he would be there. It would take her fifteen or twenty minutes to double back from the school. She only hoped that he would wait.

When her mom dropped her off in front of the school, Jane saw the cop car park across the street and settle in. She turned her back on it and marched up the steps, not looking back as she pushed the door open. She had to force herself not to run down through the courtyard, the cafeteria and out the back door. Paranoia wrapped its icy fingers around her spine as she slunk through the track and around the bleachers, coming out through the back gate and onto the quiet residential street behind the school. No sign of the cop or any other tails. She had to make a broad loop around to avoid the front of the school but she made it back to the supermarket in under fifteen minutes.

Brandon was not there. She had to force herself not to panic as she searched the lot and inside the store. Nothing. He did not have a cell

phone and he had not tried to call hers. She made herself methodically go aisle by aisle, passing all the ordinary, familiar products and all the ordinary people shopping as if the most important issues they faced were choices between Coke or Pepsi, regular or diet. It seemed unreal that the world could be going about its business with such horrible events taking place just below the surface of their waking lives. The slaughter of the Park family was front page news, but no one seemed to be reading the paper. Instead they perused shocking photos of cellulite on celebrity asses, and read tips on how to improve their sex lives, and lose weight and achieve the new fall hair. Oblivious, every one.

The panic was starting to get the better of her when a hand fell on her shoulder. She was half expecting a cop but the flood of relief that swept through her when she saw it was Brandon nearly stole her breath. He pulled her into a fierce embrace.

"What happened?" he asked.

She told him about the cop and he nodded, anxious and concerned. "I know my mom is worried sick, but I'm afraid to go home," Brandon said. "I know there'll be cops all over the place."

"We have to find Rose and get that glove," Jane said.

He nodded and together, they left the market and took a roundabout path back to the school.

Down by the back door, they ran into Amber and Lola. At first they balked when they saw Brandon, but as Jane gave them the Cliff Notes version of what had happened, they began to simmer with fury.

"If I find that fucking psycho bitch," Lola said, mouth a tight angry line. "She's dead meat."

"I can't believe this," Amber said. "I've been inches from relapse ever since Shayne and Connor. Now this." She shook her head. "Fuck. I slept with Kevin Park. He smelled really good and he kissed me while we did it. It was nothing to write home about, but it was nice. And now... She trailed off and pressed her palm to her mouth. Jane didn't have the heart to tell her about the Amber mpg. have to get that glove

"Listen," Jane said. "We've got to find Rose. We away from her at all costs and find a way to destroy it."

Brandon nodded. "It's the only way," he said. "I'm sure of it."

"Right," Lola said. "Amber, you're with me. Jane with Brandon. Stick together and keep your eyes peeled for cops."

They nodded and went their separate ways. First period had started and the halls were deserted. They slunk through the maze-like corridors, searching, but there was no sign of Rose anywhere in the school.

When they turned the corner by Ratty's office, they both pulled up short. The two detectives, Miller and Rodriguez, were standing in the hall with their backs to Brandon and Jane. Just as Jane started to back away, Miller turned toward them.

"Hey!" he called and Jane's heart leapt in her chest.

"Run," Brandon said.

"Shit," Jane whispered, taking off after Brandon.

"Hey," Miller called again as they hit the stairway, thundering down two at a time. "Hey, get back here!"

Jane was dying, heart pounding and breath like iron in her chest. She was in nowhere near the shape Brandon was and she felt as if she were a bulky puppet being dragged along by pure adrenaline. She tripped on the steps, sliding awkwardly down on her ass on the landing. Brandon who was nearly a whole flight down doubled back and hauled Jane to her feet. Her ankle had been twisted beneath her and throbbed as she forced herself to keep on going. She could hear shouting and footsteps in the stairwell above them.

When they finally came to the bottom, they saw that the padlock on the basement door had been cut and the door itself had not been completely closed. Brandon pushed the door open and hauled Jane in after him, slamming the door and throwing the bolt from the inside. They headed down the basement stairs, hearing the detectives pounding on the door behind them.

The basement floor of the school consisted of several disused storage areas jammed with old-fashioned desks, moldering textbooks and rusted filing cabinets. Mice skittered between the boxes and a

dim light glowed from the room at the far end of the hall: the furnace room.

Jane knew even before they entered the cobwebby furnace room that Rose would be there. They saw her standing at the top of a rickety ladder fastening something inside the heating duct. With cold terror in her gut, Jane felt certain it was some kind of bomb.

"Rose," she called. "What the hell are you doing?"

Rose looked back down at Jane and Brandon, green eyes slitted and angry. It was uncomfortably hot in that stuffy airless room. Rose's pale face was sheened with sweat.

"I see Sir Lancelot is back in the saddle," Rose spat. "Guess a big dick will make you believe anything."

"I saw a video of what you did with Connor and those other boys," Jane said. "You lied to us."

Rose shrugged. "Yeah well, that's not important now." She made a few adjustments to the strange device. "What matters is that Freddy is back for me and he's gonna take all of you along for the ride."

"Back for you?" Jane took a step closer to the ladder and Brandon hung back, eyes wide. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"He came for me when I was seven," Rose said. "He came for me and we were... interrupted. It's taken me eleven years to find him, eleven fucked up years of slicing myself up and feeling like a freak but all that's over now. He's come back for me, to take me. No more foster homes. No more monsters. Just me and him."

"You're insane," Brandon said.

"And you're the walking dead." Rose held up a little black remote, like something used to control a toy car. "Every last one of you."

Before she could depress the button, Brandon rushed her, knocking her off the ladder and tackling her. The remote skittered across the cement floor and Jane dove for it, but Rose kned Brandon in the balls and slipped away from him, reaching for Jane. Jane closed her fist around the little remote and Rose gripped her wrist, elbowing her in the face. Jane's head snapped back, eyes gushing water and her hand opened involuntarily. Rose snatched the remote and thumbed the button.

Jane threw her arm across her face, expecting a blinding explosion. Instead there was a series of clicks and nothing happened. Brandon had recovered and grabbed Rose from behind, pinning her arms to her sides. The remote dropped to the floor again.

"Too late, Lancelot," Rose said, laughing.

A soft hiss filled the room and Jane wrinkled her nose at a sudden curious smell like metallic bubblegum.

"Nerve gas?" Brandon asked, his voice cracking in panic. "What have you done, Rose?"

"It's nothing," Rose said through her giggles. "Just a little high-tech non-lethal device for crowd control."

"Crowd control?" Jane was starting to feel dizzy, her vision going dark and fuzzy around the edges.

"My last foster father was in the military," Rose said, her voice coming to Jane's ears as if down a long tunnel. "He was a son of a bitch but he never fucked me and he used to let me come with him to the base. You'd be amazed what kind of stuff a girl can get her hands on. Stuff like experimental sleeping gas."

"Sleep...?" Brandon said.

That was the last thing Jane heard before the gas overcame her and she spiraled down into blackness and slept.

NINETEEN

Jane stood in the dim, stuffy school boiler room, engulfed in a cold, liquid sense of unreality. Every detail of the room seemed hyperintense, jewel-like and overly complex. She seemed aware of every spider, every dust bunny, every soft, breathy sigh from the massive furnace. Brandon was there too, standing beside the knocked over ladder. Rose was nowhere to be seen.

"What the hell happened?" Brandon asked, rubbing his eyes with a thumb and forefinger.

"Are we asleep?" Jane asked. "Where's Rose?"

Brandon stepped forward and put his arms around Jane. His solid, muscular body felt reassuringly real against hers.

"I don't know," he said softly. "But I don't like it."

"Come on," Jane said, taking his hand. "We need to find her."

The fairly straightforward hallway to the stairs had become a dim and claustrophobic maze, the ceiling so low that Brandon had to stoop down as they walked. The dusty stacks of furniture around them all seemed malformed and strange: chairs with six uneven legs; desks whose scarred and graffitied surfaces slanted away at inexplicable angles. There were sleek black mice, chittering and fighting amongst themselves in the spaces between, but Jane couldn't bring herself to look too closely at them. Her peripheral vision told her that, like the chairs, they too had far too many legs.

"Shit," Brandon said, as they rounded the corner and saw the open doorway leading back into the boiler room. "We're right back where we started. We're never gonna get out of here."

"We have to keep trying," Jane said, nauseous urgency boiling in her belly. "Come on."

They doubled back, yet nothing they passed seemed even remotely familiar. Jane was beginning to fear that Brandon was right when they found the stairs at the far back of a long storage room filled with old science equipment. They had to climb over cardboard boxes and squeeze between broken metal cabinets filled with jars of acid, fetal

pigs and models of the human reproductive system, but eventually they made it to the bottom of the steps.

"You've gotta be kidding," Brandon said.

The steps were impossibly huge, the first one chest high on Brandon.

"Shit," Jane said. "This is completely ridiculous."

"Okay," Brandon said, hands around Jane's waist. "I'm gonna lift you up. Ready?"

Jane nodded and Brandon hoisted her until her waist rested against the edge of the first step. She bent in half and struggled to haul her legs up onto the step. She got one up, the other dangling down and realized that Brandon could probably see right up her skirt. She wished she had bothered to choose nicer panties, but there was no time to worry about that now. She dragged her other leg up and scrambled to her feet. Brandon quickly pulled himself up onto the step beside her and stood.

"Great," he said, looking up at the stairs above them. "One down, ninety nine left to go."

They struggled slowly up the gigantic stairs, exhaustion tugging at their aching muscles. It was grueling and torturous and, less than two thirds of the way to the top, Jane collapsed, arms and legs useless as pudding. She could go no farther.

"Jane," Brandon said, holding her face between his palms. "Jane, come on, we can't give up now."

"We who, jockboy?" she snapped. "Why don't you just go on ahead and leave the fat girl behind."

He recoiled from her bitter, vicious tone and she felt immediately sorry.

"Look, I just can't do it anymore," she said more softly. "I'm sorry."

He paused for a moment, wheels turning behind his brown eyes. Then he nodded and stood. "Get up," he said, reaching for her hand. She took it and reluctantly allowed him to pull her to her feet. He turned his back on her and patted his shoulder. "Hop on," he said. "Tarzan carry Jane."

"Carry me, are you kidding?" She shook her head. "No way."

"Yes way," Brandon said. "It's the only way."

"But I'm a hundred and twenty five pounds," she protested.

He smiled. "Come on now, you're one thirty at least, and anyway I use two seventy five for my squats. No problem."

He patted his shoulder again. Blushing thickly, Jane stepped forward and hopped awkwardly up onto Brandon's back.

"Hold on," he said and vaulted up to the next step.

As cavalier as he tried to be about it, Jane could see how hard this was on him. He was pouring sweat, arms shaking as he hauled himself up another and then another step. But she also noticed that the steps were getting progressively shorter, shrinking from chest to waist high and lower. Finally, Brandon turned and sat Jane down on the top step, lifting his T-shirt to blot the sweat from his face.

"Christ, that's a fucking workout," Brandon said. "Tell you what though, from now on I'm bringing you with me to the gym. You feel much nicer than a barbell."

The door at the top of the steps was also preposterously huge. Jane had to get up on Brandon's shoulders to reach the deadbolt. The knob was the size of a car tire and Jane needed two hands to turn it. When they stepped through the door and into the main stairwell, the door they had passed through had returned to its normal size. Everything about the stairwell was totally normal: the clean, normal-sized steps; the pale sun filtering through the diagonal metal mesh over the narrow windows; the institutional green paint on the walls. Silently they headed up to the third floor.

The top floor seemed completely deserted. Jane looked into the classroom where her first period French class was held. It was empty, its familiar glossy travel posters and clean green chalkboard identical to the first day of school. The only difference was the total lack of human presence.

"Where the hell is everybody?" Brandon asked.

Jane frowned and headed down the hall, methodically checking every classroom. Each one turned up empty. There were textbooks left open on desks. A television played some lame educational video, squawking pointlessly to itself in an empty room. An abandoned experiment bubbled away, forgotten in the deserted chemistry lab.

When they got to the end of the top floor the only room left unsearched was the art studio.

Inside it was bright and airy, with three big windows overlooking the curved turtle shell of the gym below. Jane noticed several of Brandon's paintings on the wall, including one of the famous Virgen de Guadalupe, only she wore wire-rimmed glasses and had long, flowing black hair, her Starry blue robe hugging voluptuous curves. She stood, delicately balanced on a computer keyboard, haloed in flames. The painting was titled "Nuestra Señora de las Geekgirls". Brandon smiled sheepishly.

"I painted that, before... well..." He shrugged. "I never had a chance to show it to you."

Jane bit her lip, feeling sabotaged by sudden fierce emotion. Here they were in some lunatic dreamworld where they might die at any moment and she still could not escape the spreading ripples of this massive crush that enfolded her. She loved Brandon so intensely that it hurt and it gave her this disconcerting awareness of her life as a timeline. Not just an eternal now, but a part of a greater lifetime that she might look back on and wish things had been different. This was her first love, something she would remember for the rest of her life no matter what. The love against which all future loves would be compared. She wanted to take time to savor these feelings instead of rushing madly through, but there was no time. No time. Seeing that painting and the way it made her feel made her more determined than ever to stop Rose's madness and stop Freddy. If they won, there would be all the time in the world. And if they lost... well, they just had to win.

"What's that?" Brandon said, tilting his head toward the supply closet.

Jane turned and saw a spreading crimson puddle beneath the crack in the supply closet door. "Paint?" Jane suggested.

"I don't think so," Brandon replied, frowning and taking a step closer to the closet door.

"Be careful..." Jane said but it was too late because his hand was on the knob, opening the door.

There was a corpse in the closet, bloodied beyond recognition. It was an older woman, that much was clear. Frizzy white hair clotted with dark blood, skirt around her thick waist and legs awkwardly open, revealing pale, veiny thighs and plain white underwear. Broken pots of paint splattered her with cheerful primary colors but by far the most predominant color was crimson.

Brandon gasped. "Mrs Beeman!" he whispered. "Oh my God, it's my art teacher Mrs Beeman."

"He's here," Jane said, shaking hand frozen halfway to her lips. "Freddy's here, I know it."

"Is this real?" Brandon asked, turning to Jane with bright fear in his eyes. "Mrs Beeman, is she really..."

Jane nodded silently.

"Fuck," Brandon said, a thin sheen of tears in his eyes.

Jane watched with numb horror as Brandon squatted and pulled the old woman's skirt down, smoothing it over her legs and whispering "Fuck..." over and over.

Then, they heard a sound out in the hall. Quiet at first but getting gradually louder. Footsteps.

"Brandon," Jane whispered. "Listen..."

"I never even knew her first name," Brandon said softly, eyes locked on the corpse. "She was the best teacher I ever had and I don't even know her first name."

"Brandon, be quiet," Jane whispered more forcefully and gripped his arm.

He looked up at her with a kind of shell-shocked distance in his eyes and she put her finger to her lips. The footsteps in the hall were getting louder and louder. When he heard them, his eyes grew wide, fresh fear cutting through the numb trauma.

Frantically searching for anything to use as a weapon, Brandon grabbed a sculpting tool and pushed Jane behind him as a dark silhouette appeared in the frosted glass rectangle of the door. Her heart was beating a mile a minute and her mouth felt dry and full of sand. The doorknob turned and the door swung open.

"What the fuck is going on here?" It was Lola. Shaky relief stole Jane's breath and she collapsed in a nearby chair.

"Jesus, you scared the shit out of us!" Brandon said. "Where's Amber?"

The blonde appeared in the doorway behind Lola. "Right here," she said. "Is this real?"

Jane gestured toward the murdered art teacher. "Too goddamn real for my taste," she said.

"Holy shit!" Lola said.

"This is totally fucked!" Amber said, her hand pressed to her temple.

Jane explained what happened with Rose and her weird device, the sleeping gas.

"She wants Freddy to kill her," Jane said. "And she wants to take the whole school with her."

"So you're saying we're sleeping now?" Amber asked.

Jane nodded.

"Along with everyone else in the school?" Lola asked.

"That's right," Brandon said.

"Well fine, then where is everybody else?" Amber asked, trying not to look at the dead teacher and failing.

"I have no idea," Jane said. "We searched this whole floor and didn't find a single person except..." Jane looked back at the corpse of Mrs Beeman and swallowed a thick mouthful of nauseous saliva.

"We searched the ground and second floor, plus the gym and the cafeteria," Lola said. "No one."

"Well," Jane asked, "where haven't you looked?"

Lola shrugged.

"What about the auditorium?" Amber asked.

"The auditorium?" Lola sneered. "What, is Freddy holding an assembly?"

Sure enough, when they made their way down to the auditorium, that's where everybody was. The lights were dimmed and students and teachers were packed in tight, watching some kind of brutally graphic safety film about drinking and driving.

The four of them snuck in and walked down the far right aisle, sticking close to the wall. The faces in the audience were blank and enraptured, eyes glassy. On the big, rolldown screen, a serious, stone-faced cop pointed to a huge smear of blood on the pavement. Behind him was a crashed car, the driver sprawled across the hood, headless in a bright diamond spray of safety glass. A deep, monotone voice droned on about the dangers of drinking and driving while the gruesome slide show of corpses continued: a woman nearly cut in half by the wheels of a truck; a child who had been dragged beneath a Corvette; a motorcyclist whose entire body had been pulped, save for his helmeted head; charred and barely human remains being plucked piecemeal from a twisted, smoking wreck.

"Many teens think that this sort of thing will never happen to them," the voice intoned. "But they are wrong. Dead wrong."

On the screen, four obviously twenty-something 'teenagers' in dated clothes joked and drank at a party. Jane scanned the audience for any sign of Rose. The girl was nowhere to be found.

The pretty 'teenagers' went out to a car, a big red Cadillac. There was some badly acted dialog in which one girl tried to convince her boyfriend not to drive. Of course he did not listen and the four took off. In the back seat one couple necked vigorously while the girl in the front seat told her boyfriend to slow down, her eyes wide with fear.

"Shut up, bitch!" her boyfriend said.

When the camera turned to him, it was Freddy behind the wheel. He backhanded the girl in the passenger seat and she squealed, head snapping back.

"Nobody likes a back seat driver!" Freddy said, howling with laughter as the car careened off the road.

The car skidded across the bare dirt, heading directly for the camera. The growl of the engine grew louder and louder and Jane's eyes widened with sudden awful recognition. It was just like that horrible vision she had on the first day of school. The car loomed huge on the screen, tires squealing and Freddy's manic laughter echoing through the auditorium. The students sat like zombies, slack mouthed and staring.

"Look out," Jane screamed, flinging one arm around Brandon and the other around Lola and Amber, yanking her friends to the floor.

The car smashed through the screen, razor shards of glass spraying across the crowd—impossible since the roll-up screen was made of reflective cloth not glass, but more impossible yet was the massive candy-apple bulk of the car flying out of the screen and crushing the first five rows beneath smoking tires.

Terrified screams echoed through the hall as the students and teachers ran for the doors, faces and arms glittering with hooks of glass. The doors slammed shut and the crowd jammed up against them, fists banging uselessly against them as more and more people pressed mindlessly forward. Jane saw a teacher go down, screaming as she was trampled by the panicked students.

Jane watched with drowsy horror as Freddy kicked open the reluctant car door. His companions inside the car were twisted, bloody ragdolls, lolling lifeless in the seats, and there were over a dozen dead and dying students smashed beneath the body of the car. He casually brushed a few cubes of safety glass from his red and green sweater and strolled around to pop the trunk.

"We gotta get out of here!" Brandon whispered urgently.

"The doors are all blocked," Amber said, voice tight with panic. "There's no way out!"

Freddy extracted a tire-iron from the trunk and smacked it against his palm, a smile spreading across his lips like a man about to dig into to a good meal. He walked slowly over to a female student sitting dazed in the aisle. Jane recognized her as the waif with the clarinet from her homeroom class. The girl's eyes were filled with glass, hands reaching blindly as she sobbed. Her frantic fingers found the rough weave of Freddy's trousers and she turned her blind face up to him.

"Help me," she begged. "I can't see anything. I can't see!"

Freddy smiled and raised the iron above his head.

Jane turned away, horrified at the wet, meaty thuds as Freddy obliterated the girl's face with the tire-iron. He kicked her tiny body aside and stepped up to another terrified girl, a geeky black freshman

with braces. Jane's math teacher, Mr Fong, put a shaking hand in front of her. "Don't," he said. "Please."

Freddy laughed and slammed the iron into the side of Mr Fong's head. The math teacher's glasses flew off and he fell, jittering to the floor.

"Now," Brandon said, gripping Jane's arm. "We have to get out of here now."

"This way," Lola said, leading them down the aisle toward the stage and away from Freddy and the panicked herd of students.

Jane could not stop herself from looking back. Freddy stood, splattered with crimson and cheerfully beating a jock easily twice his size with the blood-slicked tire-iron. He held the boy down with one foot and hit him until his blonde head caved in. It was the most appalling thing Jane had ever seen, but she was losing her emotions, a dull chilly distance spreading like frost over her perception. She wanted to be horrified, but her mind could not seem to accept what was happening. It just didn't seem real. She felt weirdly lazy and it seemed almost sensible to lie down and have a little nap.

Brandon was saying her name and slapping her face. She felt annoyed by this intrusion. She just wanted to rest her eyes. It was all a dream anyway. Any minute now, she would just wake up.

"Jane," Brandon said. "Come on, Jane, please, stay with me."

"She's in shock or something," Lola said.

Jane felt Brandon lift her in his arms and then they were running down behind the stage, up some stairs out into a weird little room Jane never even knew existed. For all she knew, it didn't exist in the real school. None of this was real. Why couldn't she just wake up?

Brandon sat her in a chair and slapped her gently. "Jane," he said. "Come on, Jane."

"Stop hitting me," she said, shaking her head. "Where are we?"

"We're in the security office," Amber said.

There were banks of black and white monitors, each showing a different section of the school: the gym, the hallways, the cafeteria, the auditorium.

Jane's eyes were riveted on the mayhem displayed on the little screen. Freddy was cutting a swathe through the crowd, not even

killing each person, just horribly wounding them, smashing cheekbones and collarbones, and all the while grinning like a manic gameshow host. More and more students fell to the ground and were trampled under the feet of their fear-stricken peers. On the monitor screen, the blood was black as tar.

Amber was furiously searching through every drawer, every cabinet.

"They must have some kind of weapons here," Lola said, joining Amber in the search.

Lola found a can of pepper spray but nothing more. Amber continued to search with a kind of hysterical desperation until she found a false bottom in one of the drawers.

"Yes!" she said, pulling out a nearly full bottle of Jim Beam. "I knew old Jonesy wouldn't let me down."

"Amber!" Lola said. "Are you crazy? What about your sobriety?"

"Fuck it," Amber said, unscrewing the cap and raising the bottle to her lips. "It's only a dream, right?" She tipped her head back and took a long drink.

"Shit," Lola said.

"What do we do now?" Brandon asked.

"I know what I'm gonna do," Amber said, wiping her mouth and taking another deep pull from the bottle.

"Goddammit, Amber," Lola said, snatching the bottle away. "The last thing we need is you bombed out of your mind."

"What's the difference anyway?" Amber said, close to tears. "We can't get away. He's gonna find us and he's gonna kill us all."

"Enough," Brandon said. "We just need to stay focused. If we can find Rose we can destroy the glove."

"Look at him," Amber said, gesturing to the screen. "He doesn't need that damn glove to kill us."

"Maybe it will work and maybe it won't," Brandon said. "But we gotta try something. We can't just stay here and wait for him to find us."

"Guys," Jane said softly.

"You go try something, Mr Fucking Heroic," Amber said, snatching the bottle back from Lola. "Me and Jim are staying right here."

"Guys," Jane said again, louder this time.

"What?" Lola said.

Jane pointed at the screen showing the auditorium. The majority of the students were dead or dying. A few still beat hopelessly against the door. In the middle of it all, Freddy stood completely still, staring right up at the lens of the camera. In his arms he cradled a dead teacher. Her mouth was a frozen scream filled with shattered teeth. He let the corpse drop and took a step closer to the camera.

"Can he see us?" Amber asked.

"Impossible," Brandon said.

Freddy moved closer and closer until his hideous, burned visage took up the entire screen. He raised his fingers toward the lens and to Jane's horror, the glass surface of the screen began to stretch like rubber. His fingers pressed against the screen, distorting the image of his laughing face. The screen clung to his hand as he reached for Jane. She was frozen in terror as the cold glass fingers touched her cheek.

Brandon pulled Jane away from the groping hand and, beside her, Amber staggered and sprawled across the desk dropping the bottle to smash at her feet. The glass hand gripped her blonde hair, yanking her closer to the screen and she screamed.

"Get it off me!" Amber squealed, gripping the fingers that twined in her hair and struggling to pry them loose. "Fuck, get it off me!"

"Holy shit!" Lola grabbed one of Amber's flailing arms. "Don't just stand there, help her."

Brandon grabbed Amber's other arm and together he and Lola tried to pull her free. She shrieked as if she were being torn in half and her head started to push through the screen. Where the screen bisected her face, she became black and white, wide blue eyes now pale gray as she was pulled deeper and deeper into the monitor.

Brandon and Lola struggled fiercely to hold on to her, but it was as if she were being pulled inexorably into a machine, mindlessly strong and unrelenting. Her mouth went into the screen, cutting off her scream like a guillotine and her body began to spasm uncontrollably. The little monitor screen was a mere eight inches wide, so there was no way her shoulders could possibly fit through, yet the pulling

continued until a series of violent wet snaps and crunches sounded as her bones shattered and folded in on themselves. Blood from ruptured organs exploded from splits in her taut red skin as she was yanked deeper and deeper into the screen. The three of them watched in horror and stunned disbelief as her pelvis cracked like a china platter and slid through the blood-slick square of the screen. Her legs followed easily then she was there on the other side of the screen in Freddy's waiting arms. Her body and face were smashed beyond any recognition. She did not even look human. Freddy lifted a loose and dangling rag of an arm and made her wave bye-bye to the camera like a baby. He looked up into the lens, winked, then swung the iron at the camera. The screen went gray and dead.

TWENTY

Kayla and Ashley huddled together behind a dusty length of curtain as madness reigned in the school auditorium. Ashley had been breathlessly screaming over and over until Kayla finally had to slap her several times, shaking her and telling her to get a grip or she would have to find her own hiding place. Now the blonde just stood there with her fingers crammed into her mouth and her eyes wide as saucers, staring at nothing.

When Kayla ventured a peek into the chaos of the auditorium, she wished she hadn't. It was far worse than before, if that were possible: hundreds upon hundreds of students, people Kayla knew, were flopped on the floor like dying goldfish and that horrible, disgusting guy was just laughing and laughing in the middle of it all. Kayla saw her ex-boyfriend, Ty, kneeling about three quarters of the way up the center aisle, his face masked in blood. Her mother had forced Kayla to break it off with Ty because she felt that he was "too ghetto" and a bad influence on her daughter. He was funny, with a wide, easy grin and a rubber face that never failed to make Kayla smile, even on her worst days. He could imitate anyone—teachers, students, celebrities—and his impersonation of Amber had been particularly hilarious. He was a good lover, too: unselfish and devoted. He was heartbroken when Kayla told him it was over and looking at him now, crumpling to the floor with his life leaking slowly away, Kayla realized with a sudden spike of anguish that she really loved him. If only she had had the guts to stand up to her mother, things might have been different. Maybe Ty would still be dead and she might be dead beside him, but at least they would be together. But Kayla knew that could never happen. She was more likely to run out into the auditorium and snatch the tire iron out of the burned man's hand than she would be to ever stand up to her mother.

Kayla's mother, Alana, had been born dirt-poor, as she frequently reminded her daughter. Dirt-poor in South Central Los Angeles, a bleak and nightmarish ghetto war zone more terrifying than Afghanistan, where Kayla would wind up as an unmarried mother on

welfare if she dated boys like Ty. Kayla's mother threatened her with South Central the way that Catholic parents threatened their kids with Purgatory. Kayla had no real idea of where South Central actually was, other than the obvious fact that it must be somewhere to the south of central Los Angeles. She had never been there, and the only time she ever saw images of her mother's former hood was on television during those awful riots. Kayla did not entirely believe her mother's horror stories about South Central, but she did not want to go there and find out for herself either.

Alana had worked for most of Kayla's early life as a television executive for a cable channel that catered to the demographic of middle to upper middle class black women. She spent every penny she made making sure that Kayla had all the things she had not: ballet lessons: horseback riding lessons; designer clothing, everything. They lived in the quiet and mostly white San Fernando Valley neighborhood of Toluca Lake, close enough for her mother to commute to the cable station in Hollywood but not close enough for Hollywood's urban decay to rub off on her sheltered daughter. Eventually, with careful and meticulous investments, Alana was able to save enough to buy a house out in the more affluent suburbs, far, far away from Los Angeles, Hollywood and most importantly South Central. She quit her high-stress job in order to make Kayla her full time career.

Sure, she had her mail order beauty company—high-end bath and body products made with organic, native African ingredients like shea butter, avocado and palm oil—but that was only a hobby. Her investments provided more than enough to live on and so she put all her effort into sculpting Kayla into the sophisticated, educated, high class Black Woman (Kayla always heard the capital letters in her mother's voice) she had always dreamed of becoming herself.

Of course, there was absolutely no way Kayla could ever live up to this imaginary Black Woman her mother wanted her to be. Every day of Kayla's life, she was presented with a list of her myriad flaws; abysmal, hopeless failures that she must constantly strive to overcome. The first and worst of these flaws was something so basic that Kayla could never look in a mirror without feeling horribly

inadequate. It was her skin color. Objectively speaking, it was lovely, a rich and sumptuous milk chocolate hue with a slightly golden undertone. But to her paler-skinned mother it would be forever shamefully dark, as if Alana herself had personally failed and somehow overcooked her child. Kayla, as her mother frequently reminded her, did not pass the paper bag test. The paper bag test was a particularly cruel joke between Alana and her catty friends at the cable station. If a person was lighter than a brown paper grocery bag, like Alana, then they passed the paper bag test. If they were darker, like Kayla, then they failed. Just like her dark skinned father, who had run off, Alana liked to point out to Kayla, with an even lighter skinned woman, as if there were some lesson to be learned from this, some cause and effect that Kayla needed to take to heart in order to understand the ways of the big bad world.

But Kayla's dark skin was only one of many flaws. There was her terrible, rebelliously kinky hair that her mother forced her to straighten with vile, stinking relaxers that burned her skin and eyes like acid. Kayla remembered the first time she had been forced to endure this painful treatment, the day before she started first grade.

"You don't want to go to your new school looking like some nappy-headed backwoods pickaninny, now do you?" her mother had asked while Kayla sat trembling and trying to be brave, perched on two phonebooks in the huge beauty shop chair.

Kayla had been the only black student in her first grade class at Toluca Elementary. None of the other kids would sit next to her, even though her hair was glass smooth and perfect.

As the years went by, Kayla learned to subjugate herself, to fit in at all costs. She figured out who the most popular girls were and allied herself with them through a slow and tenacious campaign of pseudo friendship, watching carefully for their likes and dislikes and making them her own. In truth, Kayla hated her shallow, mean-spirited new 'friends' intensely, but she knew that her personal feelings made no difference whatsoever. She needed them to lend her credibility and they liked having her around because it proved they weren't prejudiced, which would be, like, totally uncool and stuff.

So that nappy-headed, paper-bag-test-failing little girl was slowly buried under a meticulously constructed exterior of expensive hair, flawless nails, fashionable clothes and suburban enunciation. Kayla's mother was pleased with her creation and liked trotting Kayla out like a show dog at her frequent cocktail parties. Alana's friends all oohed and aahed over Kayla's suburban perfection and bemoaned their own children's hopeless shortcomings. Just to make sure Kayla didn't get a big head or anything, Alana would always point out Kayla's various flaws and Kayla would stand there dying while the adults clucked over her and nodded, agreeing that it was unfortunate that she couldn't seem to do better than a B- in Math, yes it was an awful shame that her hair was so hard to manage.

When that traitor Amber and her horrible geek friends had forced Kayla to cut her hair, she had been so utterly terrified of her mother's reaction that she had spent most of that night sitting alone in a sleazy all-night donut shop. Of course her mother flipped out completely and called the police. When a patrol car spotted Kayla and brought her home, her mother looked as if she had been shot, collapsing breathlessly into a chair at the sight of Kayla's bald head. As soon as the officers were gone, Kayla received the worst beating of her life. She could have come home pregnant or on crack and her mother would have been less upset. You would think that it was her mother's own head that had been shaved. For over a week, Kayla's mother gave her the poisonous silent treatment, refusing to even acknowledge her daughter's presence in the house. Then, the following Saturday afternoon, her mother marched her into the salon with an iron grip on her upper arm and sat glaring at her while her stylist spent six hours meticulously gluing pricey human hair extension onto the meager hair that was tentatively growing in on her fuzzy scalp. The tight, heavy braids made Kayla's head and neck ache all the time and Kayla's mother took the two hundred and fifty dollar bill out of Kayla's allowance.

She supposed it could be worse. Ashley's parents made her work in their restaurant to pay off the exorbitant bill for her silicone breast enhancement. Of course, Ashley's mom had picked up the bill for her daughter's nose job. It was a Glasner family tradition, a sweet sixteen

right of passage, and Ashley's two older sisters, Chelsea and Jennifer, had both gone through the same initiation. Their mom didn't want to be surrounded by living reminders of the awful truth of her own genetic imperfection.

But these mundane teenage torments all seemed meaningless next to the vile and impossible horrors unfolding before Kayla's eyes in the school auditorium. Everywhere she looked, she saw someone she knew dead or dying: Ms Tanner, the gym teacher, gasping and spitting in a pool of blood; Mr Ratner, the Principal, recognizable only by the jaunty golf club pattern on his tie. To her left was little Courtney Priest, a brown-nosing sophomore girl who had been trying desperately to be part of their clique and was the source of much mockery and scorn. Shayne had often referred to Courtney as "Mini Me" since the sophomore meticulously co-opted everything about Shayne's style and look. She even dyed her hair red like Shayne's and recently passed out during gym class from going four days without eating. Shayne had scoffed, calling the younger girl a wimp who just didn't have the spine for real hardcore marathon dieting. Now Shayne and Courtney were both dead.

Death had erased all cliques, all the cultural dividing lines that used to seem so important. Geeks lay atop jocks. Corpses of stoners were heaped up with preppies and wannabe gangstas. The few Black and Asian faces were melded together with White faces, forming a single indistinguishable ethnicity of bloody crimson. Teachers and students had died side by side. The hierarchical system of privilege and popularity that Kayla had struggled to master had been single-handedly obliterated by that mad demon in a battered fedora. And now, that demon had turned toward the stage, nose wrinkling as if he could smell Kayla and Ashley in their hiding place. Kayla sucked in a terrified breath. Ashley didn't seem to notice.

The burned man stalked toward the curtain, a slow and ugly smile blooming across his face. Kayla tried to make her feet move, to run, to get away, to do something, but she was paralyzed with fear. The demon yanked the curtain back.

"Hello, ladies," he said, his awful smile wide and hideous.

Ashley made a tiny noise like a baby bird as the burned man grabbed her and pulled her close. Kayla backed away in horror as he pulled a box-cutter from his pocket and slashed at Ashley's artificially enhanced chest. A wet splatter of blood and thick, clear jelly sprayed across his cheerful face and Ashley screamed. Kayla broke and ran.

She got less than six steps when the burned man leapt at her, tackling her and sending her sprawling on her belly on the stage. His stinking bulk pressed her down from behind and his rotten breath blew hot in her ear.

"It's no fun killing spoiled little bimbos like you," he cooed like a lover. "You know why?"

She fought and struggled fiercely against him but he was far too strong.

"It's because you aren't afraid of anything," the burned man continued. "You have no real nightmares because nothing bad ever happened to you." He caressed her cheek with the box cutter and she squealed, twisting hopelessly away. He laughed and made his voice high and whiny. "My mommy's mean to me. My hair is too curly. Poor, poor little Kayla."

"Please," Kayla begged. "Please..."

"Now your boyfriend Ty," the man said. "He was much more fun to kill. That kid had some real juicy nightmares. Prime stuff."

The man wrapped his burned fingers around Kayla's face and suddenly she was in a tiny, dark bedroom. A little boy sat pressed into a corner beneath a shattered window while several men did something terrible to his mommy on the skewed and bloody bed.

"Fuck, man," one man complained. "I can't do it with the kid watching."

"Face the wall," another said, pointing the enormous barrel of a gun in the boy's face. "Do it or I'll blow your fucking head off."

The little boy turned to the wall, too scared even to cry, and the men laughed and went back to what they were doing.

Kayla gasped and squeezed her eyes shut.

"But don't feel jealous, Kayla," the burned man said. "Something really, really bad is going to happen to you right now."

Kayla opened her eyes, tears spilling down her cheeks and splashing onto the scarred wooden floor of the stage.

"You won't live long enough for any more nightmares," he whispered. "But don't worry. I'll make sure this one is bad enough for twelve lifetimes."

He gripped a handful of Kayla's braids, yanking hard. Kayla screamed as her scalp tore, big chunks of her hair coming loose in the burned man's fist. The pain was huge and blinding as he tossed the bloody braids aside and turned her roughly over on her back. She fought to keep the box-cutter away from her face but she was not successful. He was able to peel more than half of the paper-bag-test-failing skin off her face before she sank into cold, merciful unconsciousness.

TWENTY-ONE

Monica Moore ran down what felt like an endless hallway, pulling Devon Berlin and Katie Koch along with her as they fled the massacre in the auditorium. Devon continually stumbled and Monica was forced to pick her back up, practically dragging the blonde more than half the time. When you really thought about it, wasn't that kind of how it had always been? Monica, the Vice President, who was dark haired with severe, angular features, who drove a Saturn, whose single mother owned a beauty salon; Monica, the power behind the throne, carrying her pretty blonde President like the useless puppet she was.

Katie was one of Devon's generic underlings, some perky and eager new freshman who was notable only for her profound stupidity and her parents' astronomical tax bracket. She seemed much too scared to be any help at all, but at least she could keep up and didn't fall, even in her trendy new high-heeled rhinestone flip-flops from Chinese Laundry.

This whole massacre thing was totally ruining everything. Monica had every day of the fall campaign planned out to the millisecond and right now they were supposed to be working on their campaign signs and making buttons in the art studio, not running blindly down a never ending hallway while some ugly freak murdered everybody in the school. Monica had even budgeted an extra thirty minutes to work on her fashion designs as a special treat to herself for all the extra work she had done the day before on the petition to introduce more healthy, low carb and low fat alternatives into the school lunch program. She had this great new concept for a series of fun, pink and black, retro Jackie O pillbox hats to be paired with the new 80s inspired asymmetrical separates for a bold and unique look that Monica thought really captured the plucky, forward-thinking, but still grounded soul of the new Millennium girl. Now she could throw all that right out the window. She couldn't even find the damn art studio. There was nothing but hallway, hallway and more hallway.

Devon fell again and this time she would not get up. Her strappy, three hundred dollar purple suede Marc Jacobs shoes were slowly sawing bloody welts into her ankles and she had lost her matching purse back in the auditorium. She was crying.

"I can't," she wailed. "Can't we just... hide somewhere?"

For about the millionth time, Monica wondered why Devon was so rich and pretty and why she got spoon fed everything she ever wanted when it was Monica who wiped her cute little ass for her and sculpted her into the popular icon that she was. Why Devon could afford to wear the latest collections by designers like Marc Jacobs and Vera Wang while Monica had to trawl eBay and the internet and search through outlet stores to find irregulars and discounted styles, sniffing out designers who were still unknown but sure to be the next hot thing. Why Devon could eat anything she liked and stay slender, while Monica had to struggle and starve to keep her rail thin, model figure. But all of Devon's money and beauty and privilege would never give her what Monica had, and that was ambition—ambition and discipline. Devon seemed to think that she was entitled to be Class President simply by virtue of being the richest girl in the school, but she would be nothing without Monica's drive to succeed. Monica frequently fantasized about finding a way to take over Devon's body like an alien or an evil spirit. How much easier that would be than having to manipulate her from the outside.

"Devon," Monica hissed at the shivering blonde. "Do you want to die before the election or what?"

Devon shook her head miserably.

"Okay, then," Monica said, hauling Devon to her feet. "Move."

Miraculously, they rounded a corner and saw the door to the art studio standing ajar at the end of the hallway. Monica hustled her charges inside and locked the door behind them. The door to the supply closet was open and Katie started screaming when they saw what was inside.

"Shut up," Monica spat. "You'll get us all killed."

Katie pressed both hands over her mouth, staring at the murdered art teacher.

"This isn't happening," Devon said. "This isn't happening!"

"Oh yes it is," a deep male voice replied and the girls spun to face that horrible burned man from the auditorium.

Monica still couldn't figure out what sort of look he was going for. The red and green striped sweater might have worked as a kind of tongue-in-cheek, retro seventies thing if he had paired it with some nice low rise khaki painter's pants and vintage sneakers or something like that but honestly, a brown fedora? He had to realize that the forties hipster swing kid look was deader than Glen Miller and combined with that sweater, shapeless brown slacks and greasy work boots it added up to an overall fashion don't that hurt Monica's eyes to look at. Never mind the whole killing everybody thing.

"What do you want?" Monica asked defiantly. "Why don't you just leave us alone?"

"You really want me to leave you alone?" he asked, tilting his head curiously.

"Yeah," Devon echoed, taking courage from Monica. "Leave us alone or I'll call my father."

The burned man chuckled and shrugged.

"Suits me just fine," he said. "I have bigger fish to fry. Can't waste my valuable time on minor characters like you." He turned and passed inexplicably through the wall, leaving the girls clinging together in a fearful knot in the center of the room.

Monica was furious. Minor characters? What the hell was that supposed to mean? Who could be more important than the Class President and Vice President? He must have meant Katie.

"Is he really gone?" Katie asked, eyes huge and terrified.

"I don't know," Monica said. "But we better get the hell out of here."

But somehow the door to the art studio was no longer there, replaced by seamless wall.

"Shit," Monica said. "What are we supposed to do now?"

"Shhhhhhhhhh," Devon said, cocking her head. "Do you hear that?"

There was an odd rustling sound in the far corner of the room. It was coming from the direction of a series of Monica's fashion designs

that Mrs Beeman had pinned up on the wall. Monica squinted at the drawings and realized that one of them was blank.

Katie yelped. When they looked down, they saw something so strange that it took several seconds for them to realize what they were looking at. It was the figure from Monica's drawing. Just under a foot tall and inhumanly lanky with long, stylized arms and legs that ended in narrow points and no features on its blank, triangular face. Its hair was a solid, helmet-like black bob and it wore a cute flounced mini in pink and black striped satin with a lingerie-look pink camisole top. Its tiny head was tilted up on its overlong neck as if it were looking at them, even though it had no eyes. It jabbed one pointed and handless wrist into Katie's calf, drawing blood.

"Ow," Katie squealed, kicking out at the little figure.

"Oh my God," Devon exclaimed.

A second figure had joined the first, this one dressed in a casual denim a-line skirt and a white knit poncho, waves of squiggly yellow hair radiating from beneath a blue bandana tied around its featureless head. It leapt up and jammed its pointy wrist into the soft back of Katie's knee.

A third figure was clambering up the back of Katie's blazer, this one in an asymmetrical bias cut gown of filmy cream-colored silk. Katie danced and shrieked, bug-eyed as if covered with tarantulas. Monica and Devon backed away from the flailing freshman.

"Help me," Katie cried, spastically brushing at herself. "Get them off me."

The figure in the gown stabbed its arm into the soft spot above Katie's collar bone and her scream spiraled up into a piercing, desperate octave. Two more figures joined the three, all energetically making their way up Katie's body toward her head. She stumbled backward, skull bouncing off the corner of a metal drafting table and falling semiconscious to the floor. The lanky figures swarmed over her stabbing her again and again until she was a mess of dime-sized puncture wounds, bleeding copiously onto her pink stretch velvet Old Navy blazer.

"Oh my God," Devon said monotonously, "Oh my God oh my God..." Monica backed away from Devon. There had to be some way

out of here. Katie had basically stopped moving now and the figures were starting to lose interest in her, making their way around the legs of the chairs toward Devon and Monica. Monica grabbed a pair of scissors and snipped at the closest figure, a kind of hippy cowgirl outfit consisting of a fringy suede skirt and tie-dyed top with a turquoise and leather choker that Monica now thought might not have been such a good idea. The figure's closest arm was unevenly severed and it looked up at Monica with a silent hatred radiating from its smooth, featureless face. It slashed at her knee with its other arm, a thin hot slice of pain fueling Monica's anger. She stomped on the figure, crushing it beneath her tan suede Ugg boot.

There were more clustered around Devon's ankles too and Monica hollered and stamped, slashing with her scissors. She ran to the window and picked up a chair, hurtling it into the glass as hard as she could. The glass shattered and Devon screamed as the little figures jammed their sharp wrists into her ears and eyes. As Devon crumpled to the floor, Monica had a passing thought that she ought to try and grab Devon's shoes, seeing she wore a size seven like Monica and there was no point letting a pair of three hundred dollar shoes go to waste, but the figures were all swarming toward Monica and so without thinking she climbed up onto the windowsill and out through the broken pane.

Beneath her was the curved back of the gymnasium. There was a kind of ledge that ran around all the third floor windows and if she could make it to the next classroom, she could climb back in and find some way out of this nightmare. Cautiously, she inched out onto the ledge.

The little figures climbed out after her and she kicked at them. Two of them fell and seesawed down through the air like autumn leaves, but Monica nearly lost her grip and had to cling, shaking to the rough concrete skin of the building until she regained her balance. While she fought to keep from falling, the figure in the poncho scaled her boot and jabbed its arm into her inner thigh.

"FUCK!" she cried, ripping the struggling figure loose from her leg and flinging it away. Blood soaked into the lambs wool lining of her boot.

She took several tiny, sliding steps toward the next window. There were three more windows in the art studio and then presumably another classroom, although for the life of her, Monica could not remember which one. Only three more windows—she could make it.

She had been through worse than this. This was a piece of cake compared to organizing the Junior Prom or sweeping up gross hair in her mother's salon. And now that Devon was dead, Monica saw her chance to move into the spotlight. When somebody killed the President of the United States, who took over running the country? Why the Vice President of course. She could already picture organizing the memorial wall to the students who had died, looking tearful but strong as she led the other survivors in a candle lit vigil. Of course there would be news cameras. They would want a spokesperson for the student body to express sadness and outrage while still looking ferociously chic in some kind of raw silk black shell dress with a matching three-quarter sleeve jacket by Donna Karan and maybe some nice understated calf skin pumps, lightened up with a fresh, plucky, my-best-friend's-dead-but-the-show-must-go-on accessory like maybe a cute, quirky charm bracelet or something

All she had to do was make it to that next classroom.

As she inched slowly past the second art studio window, the little figures launched a particularly vicious attack, peppering Monica's legs with puncture wounds and she clung fearfully to the window sash, swatting wildly at her tiny attackers. When she had knocked most of them off, she forced herself to continue inching along the ledge, desperately trying to think of anything other than how high up she was, how many of those evil little figures were left, and where that horrible guy was. She looked down at her boots. They had protected her ankles well against the brutal assault, but she was beginning to suspect boots like these were on the downswing of trendiness.

It didn't really matter, since they were ruined now anyway, but she feared what people might think if the networks replayed the footage of her brave escape in say a month or two, when the Ugg boots she wore would be hopelessly out of style. Why hadn't she thought of that when she was dressing for school that morning? If she ever doubted

the necessity of always striving to achieve the very cutting edge of fashion, not just on the weekends, but every single day, its importance had been proven now, beyond a shadow of a doubt. You never knew when you might be on television and God forbid you should get your five minutes of fame while wearing some tired old leftover from last season.

Monica easily slipped passed the third window. The figures were hanging back now, wary and seemingly almost afraid of her. She was in the home stretch: just ten more feet and she would be at the neighboring window. As she slid closer and closer, the little figures started to back down, sidling backward and disappearing back into the art studio.

The puncture wounds on her legs were excruciating, like splatters of boiling oil. She was going to have to wear opaque tights for a few months, but lucky for her they were going into the winter season. By the time the light, flirty, barelegged spring look was back, she hoped to be all healed up and ready for a news segment on how the students of Hemingway were moving on with their lives after the terrible massacre.

She let out a victorious little cackle as she reached the next window, resting for a moment on the sill. She wiped the sweat from her palms on the front of her cream colored silk Betsy Johnson peasant blouse and then gripped the sash.

The window would not open.

She pounded her fist against the frame and pressed up on the sash with all her might. Nothing. She was wondering if she could kick through the glass in her Ugg boots and not cut herself when the window shattered noisily and two large scarred hands gripped her ankles. She let out a breathless squeal and tumbled backward into space, swinging back and down and slamming her head against the cement wall as the vise-like hands held her suspended upside-down from the window ledge.

A head appeared, looking down at her. It was that horrible guy in the tacky hat and dirty sweater. "Nice try, Monica!" the burned man said.

She screamed, bending her body in half and struggling to reach back up to the edge of the sill when, to her horror, he abruptly let her go.

She fell. The rush of air as she plummeted downward stole her breath and she could not scream. She hit the dusty gymnasium skylight and it shattered along with her consciousness. She was dead before she hit the glossy wooden floor.

TWENTY-TWO

"We gotta get out of here," Brandon said.

"Do you think Freddy knows where we are?" Lola asked.

"Why take a chance?" Brandon said. "We're sitting ducks here."

Jane heard this conversation as if through a long tunnel. All she could do was stare at the dead gray screen through which Amber had disappeared. Amber, who had been both her hated enemy and trusted friend in such a short period of time. She found herself wondering pointlessly if she should have told Amber about Kevin's video of their sexual encounter. Did it really matter, now that they were both dead? Jane shuddered at the thought of that video file lingering out there in cyberspace: Amber and Kevin drunkenly colliding for eternity, trapped like damned souls in electronic limbo.

"Come on, Jane," Brandon was saying. "We need to go now."

Jane gripped Brandon's thick arm. Nothing felt real as they ran down flight after flight of steps, searching for a door or passage into some other part of the dream-school. Instead, they came up against an inexplicable wall blocking the stairs less than halfway down a flight.

"Shit," Lola said, slamming an impotent fist against the seamless wall.

"Come on," Brandon said, turning and doubling back. "There has to be a way out of here."

"Don't you see," Jane wailed. "There is no way out of here. It's a dream. The only way out is to wake up."

"Shhh," Lola said, cocking her head. "Listen."

They all heard the distinct sound of the security room door opening and swinging closed.

"Fuck." Brandon's eyes went wide. "It's him."

"Come on," Lola said, grabbing Brandon and Jane and taking the steps two at a time.

"Are you crazy?" Brandon asked. "You're heading right toward him!"

"Trust me," Lola said, dragging them around to a dusty landing. "Look here."

There was a small window high up on the wall. The wire mesh that covered it was loose and, when Lola leapt up and grabbed hold of it, swinging off it with her full weight, it peeled out of the wall in a puff of plaster dust and clattered noisily to the ground. The rapid footfalls were growing closer and closer. Brandon yanked off his T-shirt and wrapped it tightly around his fist, punching through the milky old glass and knocking all the fragments out of the frame.

"Jane," he whispered urgently. "You first."

He made a cup with his hands for her to step in and lifted her to the window. She wriggled awkwardly through the frame, feeling teeth of glass biting into her then fell out the other side, tumbling six feet to the scrubby dirt. She looked back up at the window and saw Lola wriggling through like a snake. Jane rolled out of the way just in time to avoid Lola crashing down on top of her. Then Brandon appeared, thick shoulders barely able to squeeze through the window frame. He was nearly through when he cursed loudly and began to flail furiously, eyes wide in terror.

"He's got my leg," Brandon said, grunting and twisting in the window frame. "Shit!"

"Come on, Brandon!" Lola cried. "Kick the fucker in the teeth."

"Come on come on come on," Jane whispered between her fingers.

Brandon hollered and with a panicked burst of energy was able to kick free and come crashing through, down in the dirt at Jane's feet.

"Holy shit," Lola said.

"Oh my God," Jane breathed, squatting down beside Brandon. His shoe was missing and his white sock was shredded, red with blood. Jane pulled the sock off, revealing a brutal six-inch gash in the calf muscle.

"Shit," she said, balling up the sock and using it to press down on the gaping cut. Brandon hissed between his teeth. "Lola, keep pressure on this. Brandon, give me your shirt."

Lola silently obeyed while Jane gripped Brandon's T-shirt in her teeth, tearing the fabric. For a fleeting moment, the warm smell of the shirt, unwashed since they had made love the night before,

brought a kind of sharp and sudden ache to Jane's heart. How could something small like that still have the power to slice so effortlessly through the horror and madness? It made her remember what she was fighting for and doubled her determination. She tore several thick strips from the material and wrapped them tightly around Brandon's bleeding calf.

"Can you walk?" Jane asked.

Brandon nodded and got to his feet, his face tight and grim with suppressed pain.

"Let's go," Jane said.

The three of them took off across the field, away from the ugly concrete bulk of the school. Brandon was limping heavily but Jane and Lola supported him as they ran. Several minutes passed and they were concentrating so hard on helping Brandon that they almost ran right into a wall that loomed suddenly up before them.

"What the fuck?" It was the school building, broken window set just above their heads. They were right back where they started.

"God damn it," Jane spat.

"We can't leave," Brandon said, leaning heavily against the wall. "The dream won't let us."

"We have to find Rose," Lola said. "The only way out is to find that crazy bitch and destroy the glove."

Jane nodded.

"Brandon," she said softly. "Are you okay?"

He was icy pale, sweat standing out on his forehead. He put on a bleak little smile.

"Never better," he said. "Let's go."

They followed the wall until they found a strange and narrow door. It was near the smoker's corner, but didn't seem to correspond to any door in the real school.

"Should we try it?" Lola asked.

"I don't see why not," Jane said. "Nothing seems to make any sense in this place anyway so one door is as good as another."

They pushed open the curious door and inside found another staircase just like all the others. They went up a flight and cautiously pushed open the door on the landing, but instead of finding a normal

school hallway, they entered what looked like a dim and squalid apartment. The door shut behind them, disappearing into the wall. Jane turned, fingers scrabbling across the unbroken surface.

"Shit," Lola said. "Where the hell are we now?"

That's when the smell hit them. Words were inadequate to describe the virulent stench of cat piss and rot and death that jammed itself into their nostrils like some kind of olfactory rape. Jane gagged, pressing both hands to her face.

"Jesus!" Lola whispered, pulling her T-shirt up over her nose. "God damn that's foul."

Cats appeared like sleek shadows, twisting silently around their ankles. They were all variations on the same black and white pattern and some of them seemed to have odd deformities, clubbed feet or misshapen heads. They were everywhere, crowding every surface: some kittens, some ancient and all with huge, dilated eyes that seemed to flash metallic green in the darkness. Jane spotted several cats that were dead or dying. Many of the corpses were missing large chunks of flesh, as if others had been snacking on their fallen brothers. There was a sofa and a chair, both so covered with cat hair that their original color could not be determined. The carpet too was buried under drifts of hair. Hundreds of bowls covered the floor, smeared with dried crusts of old cat food. Although it had been daytime out in the schoolyard, here in this place it was clearly long after midnight.

Appalled and silent, Jane, Lola and Brandon carefully wove their way between the bowls and shit and cat corpses, heading for the only door in the room. Jane paused for a moment, one hand on the doorknob and the other pressed tight across her face. Brandon nodded encouragement to her and she slowly pushed open the door.

On the other side of the door was a bedroom and on the bare king-sized mattress lay an enormous dark and stinking mountain. It took a moment for Jane to realize what she was looking at. It was a human corpse. Its sex was impossible to determine but it had clearly been dead for weeks. The skin was black and puffy and the features were flyblown and bloated beyond recognition. In life, the person must have topped 500 pounds. Now they were reduced to a soupy

mess of roiling maggots and greasy dark, disintegrating flesh. Cats were everywhere. Jane screamed and turned away, gagging.

"Stay the fuck away from me," a familiar voice said, cracking with panic.

When Jane was able to look again she saw someone on the far side of the bed, crouched into a corner of the room.

"Who's there?" Lola asked through gritted teeth.

The three of them walked slowly around the bed. There, in the corner with his dead partner cradled in his lap, was the hyper detective who had come to Jane's house asking about Brandon—Detective Miller. He was holding a gun. Knuckles of his gun hand pressed against his lips and the other arm was wrapped tightly around himself; he was rocking back and forth, eyes huge in his dead white face. His partner, Rodriguez, was sprawled across Miller's legs, stiff and twisted, his cheap white shirt dark with blood.

"What the fuck is happening?" Miller asked, body tense and shaking.

"This is a dream," Jane said softly.

"A dream?" Miller looked up at her, seeming to see her for the first time. "Who is that guy? That fucked up burned guy who killed Chuy?" He looked back down at his partner. "Fuck, man, this can't be happening."

"That's Freddy Krueger," Lola answered. "He gets into your dreams and finds ways to fuck with you."

Miller frowned. "How does he know about the Cat Lady?"

Jane cocked her head. "The Cat Lady?"

Miller nodded toward the corpse on the bed. "Christ that was more than ten years ago," he said. "I was just a rookie back then and always pulling shit duty like the dreaded 'neighbors-report-a-foul-odor' calls. But the Cat Lady..." He shook his head and wiped his mouth with the knuckles of his gun hand. "Christ, I still have nightmares about her. About this place."

"He's just fucking with you," Brandon said. "Just like he's fucking with all of us."

"You," Miller said, suddenly recognizing Brandon. "You bolted on me. I'm gonna need to take you downtown for questioning."

Brandon took a step closer and offered his hand to the detective.

"Tell you what," Brandon said. "If we make it out of this fucked up dreamworld alive, I'll go anywhere you want. Donuts are on me, okay?"

The detective frowned and then tentatively reached out and took Brandon's hand. His partner's body rolled off his legs as he stood. "But what about Chuy?" Miller asked. "We can't just... leave him here."

"We have no choice," Lola said. "Come on."

"Was that door here before?" Jane asked, pointing to a numbered classroom door against the far wall.

Miller shook his head.

"Let's go," Brandon said.

Miller and Brandon supported each other as Jane pushed open the new door.

"I want you to know, I didn't kill anyone," Brandon said to Miller as they stepped through the door and into the third floor hallway of the school. "It was Freddy. If you didn't believe me before you have to believe it now."

"There's no excuse for running away like that," Miller said.

"If I didn't, would you have believed me?"

Miller shook his head. "Honestly," he said. "I don't have a fucking clue what to believe."

"This guy Freddy, he can get inside your dreams," Brandon said. "And if you die in the dream, you die in real life."

"You mean to tell me that, Chuy..." Miller frowned. "He's really dead?"

"I'm sorry," Brandon said.

"Yeah well who's dream is this anyway? Mine? Yours? Hers?"

Jane looked down the school hallway and shrugged. "Maybe it's all of ours," Jane said. "All our dreams somehow combined into a big mental playground for Freddy."

Miller shook his head. "I don't understand."

"Look," Jane said. "I don't understand either. Nothing that's happened in the last week makes any sense at all. All I know is that we have to fight this bastard on his own terms. There is no logic, only

dream logic. We can't waste time trying to figure out what makes no sense to begin with. We have to find Rose and find the glove and get the hell out of here. You with us?"

Miller frowned warily and then slowly nodded.

"What's your first name?" Jane asked softly.

"Dean," the detective replied.

"Okay, Dean," Jane said. "Let's go."

"Jane?" Brandon said.

Jane turned back. "What?"

"Where's Lola?"

When Lola stepped through the door from the awful Cat Lady apartment, she did not find herself in the hallway with the others. Instead she was in the auditorium, surrounded by horrifying slaughter. She was standing right in the center of the room with a perfect panoramic view of the mayhem and death all around her. It was then that she realized that she was looking through the lens of a camera.

On her shoulder, she held a 35mm Arriflex camera, taking in the scene with a nice steady, handheld sweep. When she turned to the battered red bulk of the Cadillac, her lens captured a perfect medium shot of Freddy, lounging against the hood. He winked.

"Hello, Lola," he said.

She staggered back and tried to put the camera down, but it was as if it were welded to her eye.

"It's your first big budget feature, kid," Freddy said. "And you'll be manning your own camera, just like Peter Jackson. How 'Rebel-without-a-crew.'" He stepped away from the car, leering at her.

"This isn't DV kid stuff, Lola," he said. "So don't waste film on my pretty face." He gestured toward the doors with his chin. "You're missing the action. And remember, you'll only get one take."

She turned reluctantly away from him and her lens caught a shudder of movement in the large pile of bodies by the door. To her horror, she saw a deceased student pull herself slowly free of the

tangle of corpses and stagger to her unsteady feet. It was one of Devon's little blonde fashionistas, her chic, asymmetrical, retro-look dress soaked with blood and her head lumpy and misshapen beneath her carefully disheveled bedhead hair. Her eyes were hemorrhage red and unseeing as she stumbled forward, broken fingers reaching hungrily toward Lola.

Icy terror flooded Lola's belly as she backed away from the still stirring pile of bodies. Several others were struggling to their feet, bludgeoned faces turning blindly toward her. A pair of jocks, identical in the severity of their facial trauma pushed their way past a struggling teacher crouching on hands and knees and trying to get her head to sit straight on a wobbly broken neck. Freddy stood, hands on his hips and laughing as the bloody rag that used to be Amber twitched and spasmed at his feet.

Lola ran, the widescreen frame of her vision bouncing like a horror movie chase scene as she went. She scrambled up onto the stage and back to the door leading to the staircase and the security room. Shuffling footsteps and mushy, incoherent moans echoed behind her and when she chanced a glance backward, she saw a huge crowd of the walking dead, pressing doggedly after her. She let out a terrified sob and crashed into the door, slamming it shut behind her.

As she stood, back to the door, she saw she was not in the stairwell behind the stage. Her first realization was that the camera was gone. The second thing that she noticed was that everything was black and white. She was in an old farm house, doors and windows hastily boarded up. It took her only a second to recognize the house from one of her favorite films of all time, *Night of the Living Dead*. Fists were pounding on the windows, hungry, mindless grunts filtering in between the boards and Lola backed away from the door, heart in her throat. This could not be happening. It was just a dream. There had to be a way out, back to Jane and Brandon. She backed into a window and maggot pale arms burst through the boards, gripping her hair and wrapping around her neck.

The door smashed open, boards splintering and in came Freddy, eyes rolled up in his head and walking in a slow, mocking parody of a zombie. He hooked his fingers into claws, reaching for her.

"They're coming to get you, Lola," he said.

Behind him, the dead students had found the open door and were mindlessly pushing and shoving each other to get inside. The arms that held Lola would not budge as she screamed and flailed, kicking her feet and fighting for her life. One of the fumbling hands pulled the little canister of pepper spray from Lola's pocket and dropped it uselessly to the floor. The room continued to fill with the walking dead, some just pointlessly wandering around, others making a wobbly beeline for the immobilized Lola. Freddy dropped his zombie act and stood back, laughing as the first student sank his teeth into Lola's arm. Pain rocketed through her as more broken teeth ripped into her flesh and she screamed and screamed, struggles faltering.

Freddy suddenly lunged forward and shoved the others out of the way. Lola shrieked in agony as he thrust two fingers into her eye sockets, ripping off the top third of her skull. The last thing she felt was the hideously intimate sensation of Freddy's black and rotten teeth scraping against bone as he greedily devoured her exposed brain.

"Lola!" Jane screamed, pounding on the wall where the door they came through used to be. "LOLA!"

"Jane," Brandon said softly. "We have to keep moving."

"No," Jane said. "We have to find her. We can't just leave her alone in there."

"There's nothing we can do," Brandon said. "Come on."

Tears overwhelmed Jane and she said Lola's name over and over, beating her fists against the unyielding wall. Her best friend, her partner in crime, Geek warrior and blood sister, Lola had become closer than family and Jane could not give up on her now.

"Look," Miller said. "You said it yourself, the only way out is to find that girl. We wait around here, we're dead meat."

"Fuck you," Jane spat. "I won't leave her."

"Look," Miller said. "I had to leave my best friend. My fucking partner. If we ever get out of this mess alive, it's gonna be me who

has to look his wife in the eye and tell her that I couldn't save him, but that doesn't change a god damn thing. We have to move or we're as dead as they are."

"Lola's not dead," Jane wailed. "She's got to be here somewhere."

"Jane," Brandon said. "He's right. We've got to go now."

Jane squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head.

"Fuck," she said. She took Brandon's hand and he gripped her fingers tightly, broadcasting silent empathy through her bones. Together, they followed Miller down the hall. They walked in tight and painful silence for long minutes, Brandon limping heavily, Jane filled with razor-edged torment and guilt for leaving Lola, and Miller hunched and lost in his own personal hell.

"I think we need to find our way back to the boiler room," Jane said quietly as they came to yet another staircase. "That's where this all started and I have a feeling that's where it will end."

As if by magic, the door to the basement appeared at the bottom of the stairwell, looking exactly the same as when they'd first encountered it in the waking world.

"Are you sure about this?" Miller asked.

Brandon nodded. "I think she's right."

The three exchanged a look and then Jane pulled open the door.

The stairs were normal sized as they cautiously descended. They could hear the hiss of the boiler at the far end of the hall, but when they entered the furnace room, Jane was horrified to see that they were not in the basement of the school. They were in the boiler room of the abandoned factory.

"What the hell is this shit?" Miller asked, looking warily around with his gun drawn.

"This is Freddy's territory," Jane said. "I think we're in Rose's dream now."

Sure enough, Rose stepped out from behind the boiler, cat eyes slitted and hostile.

"You guys are ruining everything," she spat. "Don't you get it? This isn't about you and your pathetic little lives. It's about me."

"Me, me, me, me, me," a low, nasty voice spoke up from behind them. "It's always all about you, isn't it, Rose?"

Jane turned to see Freddy leaning casually against the far wall.

"Freddy," Rose whispered, taking a step back.

"Don't you think it's high time you grew up and faced reality?" Freddy continued. "You're not special. You're not the darling of destiny. You're just another broken condom. You're nothing."

Tears sparkled in Rose's willow-green eyes. "But what about that night?" she said. "You were supposed to set me free."

Freddy laughed. "What is it with chicks like you?" He turned to Jane, Brandon and Miller, playing to his audience. "Turning a one-night stand into eternal love." He snickered and then turned back to Rose with savage suddenness. "I don't owe you a thing, bitch." He took a step closer to her. "And frankly, I've had it with your manipulative bullshit. Your little game is over, Rose."

Rose took an awkward step back and fumbled inside her knapsack. When she pulled out her shaking hand she was clutching Freddy's glove. She held it out toward him.

"As long as I have this, you have to do what I say," she said, her voice small and petulant. "You promised you would set me free."

Freddy shook his head and lunged forward, grabbing the front of her shirt and pulling her close. She dropped the glove and it clattered noisily to the cement floor. "It doesn't work that way, Rose," he said. "You taught me that yourself. I don't need that silly little glove to do what I do best. Not anymore."

He held his bare hand up before her eyes and the tips of his fingers began to split, shiny blades pushing up through the skin and growing longer and longer. Rose's eyes widened in terror and then a kind of swooning madness swept across her features and she went limp against him, eagerly awaiting the killing blow.

A sinister chuckle bubbled up out of him. He shook his head. "Not a chance, sweetheart," he said. He cocked his other hand back and punched her square in the face. She spun away from him as he let her drop, semiconscious, to the floor.

"Now where was I?" he asked, spinning back toward Jane. "Ah yes... Jane."

"You stay away from her," Brandon said.

"Fuck you, freak," Miller said.

Jane flinched as a gunshot ripped into her eardrums. A dark, dry hole opened between Freddy's eyes. He raised his hand to the hole, a gritty trickle of ash sifting between his fingers. He grinned, unfazed.

"Should we go back and visit the Cat Lady again, Dean?" Freddy asked. "Or should I just finish you right here?"

Miller let out a wordless yell and fired several more shots into Freddy's unflinching body. Brandon threw his arm around Jane and pulled her close as Freddy ripped the pistol from Miller's hand and shoved the barrel up under the detective's chin.

"What do you think, Dean?" Freddy asked in a teasing tone. "Were you counting your shots? Think you might have one left?"

Miller's eyes were huge, face white and slick with sweat. Freddy pulled the trigger and Miller squeezed his eyes shut. Nothing happened. Freddy frowned and cracked the cylinder. A single bullet remained.

"Damn," Freddy said. "Misfire."

Freddy tossed the gun away and Miller twisted free, scrambling backward to crouch against the wall beside Jane and Brandon. Brandon stepped forward, keeping Jane and Miller back behind him.

"Brandon," Freddy said. "Right, the artist. The boyfriend." He chuckled. "I can see I'm gonna need to deal with you first, won't I, little hero?"

Freddy took a step closer, leaning in with a smirk. He said something in low Spanish and Brandon's eyes narrowed.

"Fuck you," Brandon spat. "You'll have to kill me first."

Freddy nodded thoughtfully. "Okay," he said agreeably. "If you insist."

What happened next was so fast that Jane could barely follow it with her eyes. Freddy leapt up and back, and as he shot upward, the weave of his sweater flew into shreds and huge, ragged, burnt-flesh colored wings burst from his shoulder blades. Transformation rippled through him, arms growing long and thin and fingers bending with extra joints, jaw thickening and mouth bristling with jagged needle-teeth like some awful deep ocean thing that never sees the sun. Freddy hovered near the ceiling, wings creating a huge hot

rush of air beneath him, and held his knife blade hand up before his eyes, marveling at its new and awful form.

"Cool," he said. He dove, shrike-like through the air at Brandon, slashing at Brandon's face and chest. Brandon howled with fury and swung his fist, clutching at empty air. Jane shrank back against the wall in terror.

"You know," Freddy said. "I like this new look you gave me, Brandon. You artist types are so creative." He swooped down again, this time carving deep gashes in the muscles of Brandon's shirtless back.

"Fuck," Brandon yelled, arms flailing in the air unable to reach Freddy. "Why don't you come down here and fight me like a man? Fucking coward!"

"Your mom, she's pretty creative too, huh?" Freddy said. "Maybe I'll pay her a visit after I'm done with you."

"You stay away from her," Brandon choked, face crimson with fury.

"Who's gonna stop me, little hero?" Freddy asked.

He dove at Brandon again, slashing his face and throat but, to Jane's astonishment, Miller blindsided Freddy, leaping at the winged demon and taking him down. Freddy tried to fly, flapping his ugly wings furiously, but Miller grabbed one wing by its base and ripped it upward, tearing the delicate and impossible bone loose from Freddy's back. Freddy shrieked and sliced into Miller's arm and chest, sending the detective reeling back, white shirt soaked with blood. Freddy leapt on the fallen detective like a predatory bird, tearing into Miller's throat with his jagged teeth and Jane turned away, unable to watch as wet, hungry sounds of ravenous eating filled the room.

It was then that her eyes fell on Brandon. He was down on one knee, pressing both hands to a spurting fountain of blood on the left side of his neck. His eyes were wide with desperation and terror as they locked on Jane. She ran to him.

"Brandon," she whispered. "Oh my God."

He looked into her eyes, face dead gray and sheened with dying sweat. "Jane," he whispered. "Go. Run!"

Adrenaline surged through her and she turned and bolted. Racing along the wall, she searched desperately for a door. There was nothing. She slammed a sore fist into the unyielding wall and Freddy turned to her, grinning. His face and body had returned to their normal, manshaped form. There was dark blood smeared all around his mouth, slicking his chin.

"Jane," he said.

She slumped down against the wall, unable to move, unable to scream. Was this it? Was she going to die now? It was so hideously unfair. A kind of grief-fueled fury coursed through her veins as Freddy crouched down in front of her, gripping her face in his knife hand. The blades gruesomely protruding from his fingertips sliced into her cheek, blood oozing from four parallel cuts. Just like Rose. She looked up into his hateful yellow eyes and spat defiantly into his face: for Amber, for Lola, for Brandon, her first and only love.

"Go ahead and kill me you fucker," she spat, her voice a tight and gritty whisper.

"Don't mind if I do," he replied, running his pale rag of a tongue out to taste her spittle where it oozed down his scarred cheek.

He raised the blades before her eyes and Jane refused to shut them, refused to look away. The hate she felt ran so deep that it erased her fear and she stared back at the monster who took away everything that mattered in her life.

His eyes went suddenly wide and his twisted lips parted, a gout of dark blood slipping between them. To Jane's utter shock and amazement, four points appeared beneath his ugly sweater, tearing at the wool and twisting as his own glove burst from his chest, clutching his black and rotten heart.

Rose stood behind him, pulling him to his feet like a ventriloquist dummy as her gloved hand squeezed his still beating heart. He gasped in shocked surprise as she pulled her arm out through his back, taking his heart with her. He turned toward her, staggering to his knees.

"You're just like all the others," Rose said backing away with the heart held high like some lunatic trophy. "I thought you were special

but you're just another selfish monster. I gave you everything. I gave you your power and I can take it away."

"No," he said, reaching out to her as she kicked open the enormous furnace door. Inside was a bright and fiery inferno. "Rose, wait," he cried but she just crossed her arms across her chest, shut her eyes and let herself fall backward into the flames.

As fire engulfed the girl whose madness gave him life, Freddy screamed and began to fade to thin and transparent shreds, dispersing into the air like milk in water as clots of ash shifted loose, dancing in the weak light and pattering softly to the floor.

Jane ran to where Brandon lay, cradling him in her arms. Brandon's breath was rapid and shallow as his life spilled out onto the cold concrete, soaking Jane's T-shirt.

"I'll get help," she said, tormented tears spilling down her cheeks. "Just hang on, Brandon."

"Don't," he whispered. "Don't leave me."

"You need a doctor," she said. "I need to get help."

"I'm dying Jane," he said. "I can feel it."

She shook her head. "No," she said. "No, there's still time." She hit her temple with the heel of her hand. "We just need to wake up."

"Jane," he said. "I love you so much. Tell me that you love me. I need to hear it."

"You're not going to die, damn it."

"Please," Brandon said.

Jane burst into anguished sobs. "I love you," she said, holding him to her chest. "I love you. You can't die on me. I won't let you. I love you."

He clutched weakly at her arm and said something in Spanish. His dark eyes were starting to lose focus.

"I don't understand," she wailed. "I don't know what you are trying to say. Brandon, please, don't die on me. Hang on. You can make it."

He did not speak again. She continued to tell him that she loved him for several minutes, even after he was dead. Then she threw back her head and let out a cry, a primal shriek of emotional agony echoing up from the depths of her soul. The sound rippled through the boiler room, echoing off the walls and the fabric of the dream

began to crumble around her. When she opened her eyes she was in the school basement.

TWENTY-THREE

Jane crouched over Brandon's lifeless, cooling body in the hot, stuffy confines of the school boiler room. The space was quickly filling with vile, stinking smoke, and Jane squinted at the fallen corpse of Rose, laying sprawled on her belly with her head thrust into the furnace. Flame licked at her ugly shirt, traveling busily down her body. Jane knew she needed to get the hell out of there, before the smoke overwhelmed her, but part of her wanted to stay, to die with Brandon. The only thought that penetrated her thick, syrupy shock was an image of her mother, receiving word of Jane's death from some faceless official. She could not put her mother through that.

She stood, letting Brandon's head fall to the floor, his dead face twisting away from her. Slowly, moving as if still in a dream, Jane turned away and headed for the stairs. When she pushed open the basement door, the bright sunlight nearly blinded her. The air in the stairwell was honey-thick with warm, drowsy afternoon light. Jane touched a hand to her cheek and felt the sting of four parallel cuts, still wet with blood. She mounted the stairs like a sleepwalker, heading for the auditorium.

If the carnage had been bad inside the dream world, it was a thousand times worse in the mundane light of day. Jane was unable to budge the main doors and wound up having to go around behind the stage. When she stepped out onto the center of the stage, the full horror of what had happened, what she had allowed to happen, hit her like a bucket of pig's blood and she jammed the heel of her hand into her mouth, muffling an abortive scream.

Hundreds of twisted bodies lay heaped by the double doors. People that Jane knew: teachers, students, people who had done no harm to anyone. She saw Mr Fong, Madam Koenig, even that awful Mr Fielding whose only crime was being boring. He had died trying to protect an older man, a science teacher whose name Jane didn't know. And there was Amber, newly sober and just starting to rebuild her life only to have it taken away from her. She lay, not smashed and bloody as she had been in the dream world, but serene and

beautiful in the aisle as if waiting for a director to yell cut. Worst of all, in the center of the auditorium, draped across the smashed and broken seats, was Lola.

Jane ran to her friend, clutching Lola's stiffening hand. There were no visible injuries, nothing wrong with her that Jane could see. She was simply dead. Cold, lifeless clay in the shape of a girl who had once been the best friend Jane ever had. There would be no career in Hollywood, no brilliant new make-believe monsters to menace the movie-going public. A real monster had put an end to all her dreams, all her hopes and plans for the future. Everything was gone because of Rose's lies, and because of their willingness to believe.

Icy numbness engulfed Jane as she turned and walked back up onto the stage. Overhead, there was a thunder of helicopters. Sirens tore through the impossible stillness that blanketed the scene. Jane made her way down the back steps and out into the hall. There were more dead students in the hallway and, worse yet, some still moving, eyes wide and blank in shellshocked faces. She saw the big detective lying dead in the doorway of Ratner's office and the fat kid from her homeroom rhythmically banging his head against the wall. Suddenly, the sprinklers went off in a cold, rusty gush, drenching Jane from head to toe, plastering her hair to her bleeding face and soaking through her clothes.

"Jane DeHaan?" a deep but muffled male voice called out.

Jane slowly turned toward the voice. There was a man in a menacing black SWAT outfit, pointing a huge gun at her forehead. His face was hidden behind a complex gasmask, rendering him insectoid and inhuman.

"Put your hands behind your head," he said. A group of several other identically clad men appeared behind him, all holding guns, all pointed at her.

Jane had to force her arms to move, clasping them behind her head. She felt nothing. A vast, arctic nothing like a gaping hole inside her.

"Get down on the floor." The lead man gestured with his gun. "Now."

Jane stumbled awkwardly to her knees. The green tile floor seemed to tilt up slowly until it pressed against her cheek. It was cool and wet and felt almost good against her fevered skin as the water gushed down over her. Then there was someone on top of her, doing something to her hands but it didn't seem all that important. She was hauled roughly to her feet and marched down the hall and out the front steps, hands cuffed behind her.

Outside the school, panic reigned. Parents crowded against yellow tape, faces pinched with anxious terror. Paramedics carried the wounded on stretchers: those that screamed endlessly and worse those who didn't. She saw Lola's parents standing together by the steps. Her father had his arm around her mom. Her mom wore a clay-spattered T-shirt, her hand over her mouth. Media vultures swarmed excitedly through the chaos, shooting a tearful parent, a bloody hand swinging from beneath a sheet, smoke pouring from the school building, a pair of students clutching each other like plane crash survivors.

When the cameras spotted Jane and her black clad escort, they rushed at her like blood-frenzied sharks.

"Jane DeHaan," a blonde woman shouted.

"Over here Jane," an older man called.

"Jane."

"Right here, Jane."

"Jane."

"Jane!"

"Why did you do it, Jane?"

"Tell us about the Petticoat Mafia, Jane."

"Were you angry at your fellow students?"

"Were you bullied?"

"Tell us why you did it, Jane."

"Why?"

"Why?"

"Tell us why, Jane."

Cameras all around her, arms and bodies pushing and shoving and shouting and the black clad man yanked hard on her cuffed wrists, grabbing her head and pushing it down, forcing her into the back of a

police car. Outside the window, through the forest of bodies and cameras and fluffy microphones on poles, Jane saw her mother. She was wearing that ugly blazer over her blue dress and she was crying, pushing violently toward the car that held her daughter. Cameras surrounded her and she struck out at them, calling Jane's name. Jane put her hand up against the window as the car began to nose its way through the teeming crowd. Ambitious cameramen ran after the car and Jane's mother was lost in the press of bodies.

Jane turned away from the window, her gaze trapped in the pattern of cracks on the seat in front of her. Better not to look, not to think; better to follow the little maze of cracks and let everything else slide down under the heavy mercury wash of cold, mindless nothingness. It was over. There was nothing left.

EPILOGUE

It was late, but the television in the activity room still droned on, the weak speakers buzzing with the overtones of the anchorman's voice. The television slept during the day, its eye closed to the room while the patients created pointless crafts, making magazine collages of their lives and things that they'd loved when they were on the outside. No one let the television open its eye during the group therapy sessions, either. While the Hispanic lady in the periwinkle polyester skirt and white cotton blazer encouraged the inmates to talk about their problems so that they could 'find their commonalities, the television slept. The television even slept while everyone ate in the little cafeteria, eating bland, suicide-proof finger food. At night, the nurses doled out medication to keep everyone peaceful and compliant and herded everyone into the long dormitory. Those who were considered especially dangerous would be locked down in private cells. Each person would lie on a cot and wish that the television was awake instead of the nightlight. Everyone was afraid of the dark.

Who knew what kinds of dreams the television dreamed behind the dark gray lid? It only awakened when the activity period started at precisely seven pm. But it continued to dream. Sometimes the inmates didn't notice because they were too medicated to be as awake as the television. Often they didn't realize the television was on at all. They dreamed with their eyes open and talked openly with their dream images to the exclusion of what or whoever was really there—sort of like the television.

Tonight, as soon as dinner was over, medications were administered and therapies were concluded for the day, the television awoke. There was really only one person who cared that the television opened its dark gray lid to reveal its dreams. Some of the others pretended to care, but other things chattered in their heads and their vision blurred from the medication. Others were positioned as if they did care—catatonics with waxy arms and legs that could be pressed into any chair to look as if they were aware of

the television. But the television was not fooled. The television knew who was watching, who needed its dreams, who felt the impact of the images it shared.

It wasn't fooled.

But this one person had been watching for days on end. This one person needed the television's dreams because this person had no dreams of her own. Hopeless, friendless, sleepless, and lost—no dreams. She watched every single night. The television anticipated that she would be there on the functional, stain-proof vinyl couch in the activities room every night. And she was. The television imagined that it only showed its dreams to her, that it dreamed especially for her, its faithful lover. She watched with a strangely intense detachment and the other patients were fearful of her and let her watch whatever she wanted to watch. She always watched the same thing. The television did not mind. It could have shown her much worse things, like: tired sitcoms with grating laugh tracks; or the brainless 'reality shows, whatever that meant; or soap operas that had been on so long that Luke and Laura's grandchildren now ran spy operations with Robert Scorpio's grandchildren on mysterious islands in the Bermuda Triangle; or formulaic dramas about pretty teenagers in Los Angeles who hurt each other's feelings. The television had tastes; it just didn't have control over what it showed. Its unconscious ran much like that of the humans who watched. Out of control.

But not this human.

Tonight the programming was like the last several nights: *60 minutes*, CNN, FOX—whoever had the latest report with the newest tidbit of information on this latest and most horrific high school massacre. They usually ran something like this: Outside of a high school in a leafy suburb, reporters of every stripe—sensational, respectable, fanatical, reputable—crowd around a pale young woman with long black hair. Wet and silent, she wears all black clothing. It's not a good sign. They pick up on the black and immediately label her a freak. Troubled. She's not an anorexic teen, but a "real girl" with a "real body," perhaps a few pounds overweight by popular standards. A fierce, stone faced SWAT team leader—also

dressed completely in black though no one seems to comment on that fact-hovers over her as he tries to push her head down into a waiting car. It is almost as if he is afraid of her, the way he keeps her at arms length, as if her homicidal madness might be catching. The reporters shout question after question. The young woman seems to be looking somewhere else, moving sluggishly like a sleepwalker. The man in black puts her into the car and wipes his hands on his bullet-proof vest. A voiceover intones:

"...461 dead...

"...the worst high school massacre in history."

"...Petticoat Mafia..."

"... could this have been prevented?"

"... was there any warning?"

Emergency crews surround the high school. Police. Fire department. Sheriff. Yellow tape with black lettering wraps from tree to door handle to window latch. Every patch of asphalt and sidewalk is chalked and flagged for forensics. Fires burn out of control from damaged electrical wiring and broken gas mains, despite the shower of water from the emergency sprinklers. The carnage is obscured by the cracks in the glass of the front doors. From the outside, it looks as if an earthquake or some other natural disaster might have hit the school. But the blood streaking the skin and clothes of the black-haired young woman tells another story. There are four even slashes across her left cheek, like the claw marks of an angry lion, too perfect to be accidental. Then there are all the bodies of the students, so many bodies, piled up like victims of genocide in some far away land, but these are American kids, suburban kids in Nike sneakers and Gap jeans: *our kids*, the voiceover reminds the viewers in solemn yet emotional tones.

The SWAT cop slams closed the door as the young woman settles into the back seat behind the black grill. She sits back there, staring: numb. The reporters surge toward the car, each with one hand pressed to the window while the others grip microphones with bulbous, spongy heads. Nobody can get close to her. Their questions no longer seem to bother her. Nothing bothers her. The cop car pulls away and the reporters are denied any answers. Her lack of emotion

in this footage will be analyzed endlessly by psychologists and pop authors, desperate for any kind of answer.

Not that there ever would be any kind of answers that they would understand.

The news reports throughout the evening flash back to the school as the emergency crews and county coroner's office pull one corpse after another from the school, carrying each one out in a body bag. Parents wail. Families huddle. This is worse than Columbine, the experts comment. Far worse.

The experts continued to comment, night after night.

A chic, well dressed older woman addressed a psychologist who was more than a little geeky.

News Show Host 1: "So, what was different about the Hemingway High school massacre?"

Expert 1: "A number of things. For one, the children involved in this case were female."

News Show Host 1: "But wait a minute. That's shocking, isn't it? We are all too familiar with young boys going on schoolyard killing sprees, as was the case at Columbine, but how often does something like this happen?"

Expert 1: "But why is it shocking? Girls are just as able to commit acts of violence as boys."

News Show Host 1: "Able, but not as likely."

Expert 1: "True, but keep in mind these girls were very much like the boys who committed the Columbine killings."

News Show Host 1: "How so?"

Expert 1: "They were bullied viciously from a young age. This bullying made them outcasts. As a result a kind of fury built up inside them. They became susceptible to negative influences. They wore black in imitation of their death rock idols, listened to angry music like Marilyn Manson and were obsessed with violent horror movies. All the signs were there."

News Show Host 1: "Oh, I see what you're getting at. But not all children respond to bullying with homicidal attacks, am I right?"

Expert 1: "That's not the point. These children were under extreme stress for a long period of time and it finally exploded. They had

insufficient coping-skills to deal with these strong feelings. They needed self esteem and the ability to stand up for themselves, but they had neither, so they looked for answers in rock songs and splatter films that teach them that killing is cool."

News Show Host 1: "But what about the school officials? Shouldn't they be more actively involved in policing these things? Was there anything they could have done?"

Expert 1: "First of all, teachers and other school officials often watch incidents of bullying and do nothing about them. And they are rarely sought as a resource because life often gets tougher for children when they complain to an authority figure. They fear that the bullying will only get worse. Some children even prefer suicide to reporting bullying."

News Show Host 1: "That's not very encouraging. So, how do we combat this? How do we, as parents, protect our children and our schools from the sort of senseless violence that we've witnessed here at Hemingway?"

Expert 1: "Talk to your children. Find out what's going on at school. Investigate bruises and other telltale marks that indicate your child might be suffering at school. Watch for a change in style of dress, especially all black clothing, or a sudden interest in dark, violent films, video games or music. If they become withdrawn or begin to show signs of violent fantasies, take them to a family therapist or religious counselor."

Then, a slick, eye-catching montage of gory film clips and images of black clad and sinister musicians stuttered through the television's dream, artfully spliced together with footage of the destruction of Hemingway High.

On the next channel, a very serious man in a tasteful suit spoke to an older man who was clearly a high brass cop.

News Show Host 2: "But tell us, how exactly did four young girls commit so many murders so quickly? They had no guns, right?"

Expert 2: "That is correct."

News Show Host 2: "So what did they use if they had no guns? We've heard all sorts of explanations, from mass hysteria and drugs to poison and cutting weapons of some sort."

Expert 2: "Well, Tom, there's a lot of speculation, of course. Traditionally, girls are not as drawn to guns as boys are."

News Show Host 2: "But it's been said that girls are just as able to commit violence as boys. Why not use guns?"

Expert 2: "The alleged perpetrators in this case were much smarter than that. They are believed to have used much more subtle, sophisticated means—"

News Show Host: "—of slaughtering over four hundred students?"

Expert 2: "That is correct."

Always the discussion came to the inevitable topic of how it happened. Why' and 'who were easy enough, but 'how was another subject entirely. There were demolitions experts and hypnosis experts and mass hysteria experts. The one expert who had anything sensible to say was the one who said that some kind of narcotic had infected almost every student—a sleeping agent. But how that contributed to such a sweep of violence they could not say. Perhaps teachers and students alike were slumbering when the killers blitzed through with their weapons of mass destruction. But then that did not explain the rather active poses some of the students had assumed in their deaths...

News Show Host 2: "Now, there were reports of some sort of narcotic gases, but..."

Expert 2: "Yes. In this case, the alleged perpetrators were apparently able to utilize an extremely unusual weapon in their attack against the school. It is my understanding that a... device was found. A military device."

News Show Host 2: "What sort of device?"

Expert 2: "Sources have confirmed the device in question to be military in origin but will not confirm the exact nature of said device."

News Show Host 2: "Where would teenage girls gain access to a top secret military device?"

Expert 2: "Apparently one of the alleged perpetrators had a former foster father in the military."

News Show Host 2: "Just like in the cases with the young boys, these girls had access to illegal means of carrying out their

aggression and once again we see the children obtaining the means for destruction from within their own homes."

Expert 2: "That is correct."

News Show Host 2: "But military or not, sleeping gas is a non-lethal substance, am I right."

Expert 2: "Technically, yes, that is correct."

News Show Host 2: "What do you think the girls did with the other weapons that were clearly used in the attack? And do you think they meant to kill themselves?"

Expert 2: "Oh, absolutely to the second. As you'll recall the Gibbons girl was found burned to death. Homicide was not a likely cause of death in this case, as they could find no evidence that anyone else had forced her into that furnace. Suicide is a far more feasible cause of death in that particular situation."

Another channel, another expert. This one was a severe older woman with an unflattering bob haircut and dark lipstick, being grilled by a wet eyed and oh-so-concerned blonde.

Host 3: "Is it true that the members of this Petticoat Mafia had substance abuse problems and were sexually abused as children?"

Expert 3: "That's right, Sheila. They were also quite sexually promiscuous, often with older men. This is frequently seen in victims of childhood sexual abuse."

Host 3: "And tell us more about Jane DeHaan, the ring leader and sole survivor of the Petticoat Mafia."

Expert 3: "Jane was an honor roll student, highly intelligent, creative and imaginative. As is frequently the case, the leader of this gang was far more intelligent than her underlings, so she was easily able to manipulate them into participating in the massacre. She was also a follower of the so-called 'Goth' movement and was obsessed with death. Her room was decorated with photographs of corpses and she often wrote of her desire to kill on her internet journal. And I find this home video footage to be particularly telling."

Cut to footage of the dark-haired girl, happy and laughing with her friends. She pulls a demonic monster mask over her head and waves a huge knife at the camera, chanting: "Kill, kill, kill!"

Host 3: "It's just unbelievable. I know for me personally..." The blonde host paused and clutched her heart, going teary eyed toward the camera. "As a parent of two young daughters, this case strikes very close to home."

Expert 3: "We need to be there for our children. Communicate with them and above all, watch for the signs."

Host 3: "What kind of signs?"

Expert 3: "Dressing in all black clothing. Listening to certain types of music..."

Sometimes the television just wanted someone to blow the dust bunnies from its cord and wipe the grime from its top with a damp cloth and a splash of Pine Sol. It did not care about the endless, pointless discussions that went nowhere, like a labyrinth of dim hallways in a cheap hotel, like a snake endlessly devouring itself and never feeling full. The girls they spoke about at such length were rendered down reduced to a handful of unflattering photographs and some bad video clips that played over and over again. There was that one scene of the black-haired girl looking dazed and blank as she was placed in the cop car. There was the monster mask video, a favorite of those who favored a religious point of view. And there was the other media favorite: a snippet of footage showing the black-haired girl embracing her now dead purple-haired friend. Again and again, the purple-haired girl turned to the camera and gave the lens, the audience and the world the finger while the experts carved her up into neat, safe, psychologically defined portions that could be spoon fed to a public desperate to hear that she was totally unlike them in every way.

The networks also showed reams of footage of the girls' parents, shoving reporters out of their doorways or huddling under black rain coats raised to cover their faces as they made their way to their cars. The experts, the parents of the dead, they all had plenty to say and tears to shed ad infinitum. The girls themselves were reduced to mute photos and mostly wordless video images, silently giving the world the finger.

Curiously, the media did not speak to any of the stray survivors, who continued to scream long after someone slid a stainless steel

needle into one of their faded blue veins, strapped them to a gurney, and wheeled them into an ambulance. No one could ever get a coherent word from them again, the news show hosts reported. After it was clear the survivors would never emerge from their respective sanitoriums, the news show hosts stopped referring to them almost entirely. They were neither in 'critical condition,' nor permanently disabled (not physically, anyway) and so they simply ceased to be newsworthy. It was as if the media didn't know what to do with them. As often happens with the mentally ill, they disappeared completely from the collective consciousness. Some of them were in a revolving door system of mental health care, jail, and homelessness: medicated, abused, forgotten.

Over the past three years, the population in front of the television had changed. A thick metal cage was installed around the television. Where once had sat mostly harmless lunatics, now were killers, people whose toxic madness had slopped over onto others, not just insane, but criminally insane; mothers who cooked and ate their babies; formerly mild-mannered office workers who snapped and poisoned the nondairy creamer, taking out the entire typing pool; doctors who started to believe they really were God; religious leaders who suddenly decided members of their flock needed an early ticket to heaven; and one other, the television's faithful lover, the black-haired student with her glassy eyes and scarred cheek sitting on the sofa with an unread Jane Austin novel in her lap. This murderess, this criminal mastermind who had brilliantly engineered the slaughter of over four hundred of her fellow students—no one on the ward could come close to those kinds of stats—*she* could watch anything she wanted.

Sometimes the television wanted to close its eye to her so that she would not see its dreams. She did not need to see those kinds of dreams. They were obviously far too upsetting. But when the screen blurred and snowed, the nurse would slap the side of the television. So the television cleared up its dreams for everyone to see.

The funerals were the worst, but everyone on the ward loved them most of all. A massive funeral followed the massacre, where they created an entire cemetery just for the children who died. It was like a mass grave except that each body had a casket as it should—a dark wooden casket containing a young person who would never graduate from high school, never change, never grow old. The families went to multiple funerals of every denomination, supporting each other in sobbing clusters. The news show hosts ran lists of student names. All who died got their moment of fame then in that running list or face collage. These dreams were the dullest to the television, but the most moving to the television's most avid watcher, as she leaned forward and her eyes quivered at the scenes of hearse after hearse rolling into the cemetery lot, the media collages and the lists.

But there was one funeral that the girl could not seem to bring herself to watch. In this particular video clip, a crowd of young Mexican women supported an older woman at their center as her young and handsome son was lowered into the ground under a spray of cala lilies. The television felt bad that this particular footage was a favorite of the news media, shown over and over as perverse and spurious links were drawn between the dead boy and the killer girls. Eventually, the images of death were eclipsed by images of destruction as they tore down the abandoned school building. The wreckage of the building seemed almost more moving than the funerals, but the television did not see sadness. Rather, the girl who was watching seemed fascinated, surprised even. And when several of the families announced that they would move away—the beginning of a mass migration from that cursed suburb—her face dipped down and away from the television. She did not look up for some time.

The television honestly did not understand why the nurses let her watch its dreams, these disturbing images that flashed from behind its dark gray lid. But that was not for it to understand—just to dream in its waking. Maybe the nurses were as cruel as the killer girls they spoke of. Or maybe they were just unfeeling. As long as someone was not banging their head against the wall or pulling out their neighbor's hair, the nurses seemed unconcerned with whatever

happened to the patients for whom they cared. Most of the patients seemed pacified by the dreams of the television. But now that the television had such different dreams, they often grew agitated.

One of the patients stood before the faithful and declared that, as the Son of God and secret agent of Napoleon, she had been given the special responsibility of governing the viewing population of the activities room. She tucked the fingers of her right hand into the opening of her flannel shirt between the white plastic buttons and declared to the assembly of 'droolers and droners' that He, Jesus of St. Helena, King of the Exiles, had accepted the responsibility and would adjudicate the night's viewing. He charged the television's girl with a number of crimes: conspiracy to monopolize the television; conspiracy to emit poisonous rays of blue; conspiracy to eat paste and vomit in the President's secret shoebox of police tapes; conspiracy to keep the King incorrectly imprisoned in the female ward; conspiracy to marry Jimmy Carter; conspiracy to break open her teeth to allow the Catholics to escape; conspiracy to recruit aliens to the CIA; conspiracy to sing Johnny Cash songs backward and talk to devils. It was a heavy list of accusations.

The girl just stared at her accuser and said nothing.

The other patients stirred when they heard the list of accusations. The King was not a multiple murderer, just a one timer who had strangled her girlfriend and then set fire to her body in the parking lot of her parents' franchise smoothie bar. The inmates hollered, moaned and laughed. One of them, an anorexic young woman who had stalked and tried to kill a well known male pop star, hopped in one place for several minutes, changing feet and swinging her arms, until her neck and forehead were dripping with sweat. She then walked over to a fat, mentally disabled slug of a young woman and pushed her chair. The fat woman scowled and moved her lips in silence. She had not spoken a single word since she had killed her sexually abusive caregiver with a screwdriver. The stalker pushed the fat woman's chair again and this time the woman swung a flabby arm at her. She ducked, making a raspy noise that eventually became a steady braying.

"That's right," cried the King of the Exiles. "That's right. We have amongst us the living, breathing carbon copy of the Antichrrrrrist."

She rolled the 'r' in Antichrist and her eyes flared dramatically. Clambering onto the battered coffee table, she kicked the magazines off the surface, the pages fluttering to the floor in a confused heap of celebrities and makeup. The hooting, growling, grimacing and braying rumbled through the activities room. Some faces glowed with anticipation of a frenzy. There hadn't been a good frenzy since Rita The Killer Nanny' Carr tore off her shirt and beat her head against the wall so hard that the blood mingled with the gray juices of her cerebrum as they smeared on the mark-resistant paint. Rita had earned the nickname "The Killer Nanny' in the tabloids after she had suffocated four of her small charges while their parents were in Europe. When everyone saw Rita dragged away shirtless and twitching, they all stripped off their clothes and ran madly (how else would they run?) around the activities room and into the halls. It was a really good frenzy. There had been some talk of upping the security, and even instituting twenty-four hour lockdown, but the endless discussion within the bureaucracy went nowhere and things stayed as they were.

The other faces in the room dimmed with concern. They did not want a frenzy. A frenzy meant that someone would come and turn off the television and make them go to bed. Many people would be restrained and the staff often did not differentiate between who was agitated and who was not. The nurses only cared if things were quiet and on schedule. The nurses often wagged their key chains tauntingly at the patients. The keys were freedom. The keys let the inmates outside to the exercise area where they were allowed their once weekly mandated thirty minutes of aimless wandering, supervised by armed guards in towers atop each of the four corners. But far more importantly, those keys also let the nurses themselves pass through the big doors and into the outside—not the bland captive 'outside' of the exercise area, but the vast and unlimited outside of the real world, where there were glossy red cars and dogs with healthy teeth and bones and delicious hamburgers for only a dollar ninety nine. There was frosty cold beer and deodorant soap

that smelled like a fresh Irish waterfall instead of like coal tar and industrial disinfectant. These were things they saw on the television that they wanted. If they could not have them, they could watch the dreams of the television and remember what they were like—that is, if they ever knew to start with. Some of them never had families, cars, careers, homes. These unfortunates had known nothing but the walls of institutions and then had lashed out against their fellow inmates and wound up here, in yet another institution. But others had once had that kind of thing and more until one day they just got lost in their thoughts. They began to explore 'alternate realities' and began to behave strangely. They knew what they were doing was not 'normal, but they could not help themselves. Eventually it seemed quite logical to pick up a knife, or a gun. In a single murderous outburst, they lost everything, no longer able to resist the voices egging them on from the rotten cores of their mad, howling brains. One way or another, they would never have more than the grass on the grounds and the sky. That small patch of sky, imprisoned between four walls just like they were. The rest came from the television.

The King of the Exiles held both hands high, beseeching some Maker above her.

"Holy, holy, holy," she cried, the images of the television flashing behind her head in a media halo of car commercials and station identifications. "Holy God Almighty, give us the television." She swung both arms back, palms up to beseech the television.

The television noisily dreamed on, unheeded.

And then the frenzy began. The anorexic woman brayed and someone else chattered like a squirrel.

"Holy, holy, holy," the King of the Exiles crooned, dancing to the doll-dagga-buzz-buzz of the soft drink commercial. The coffee table was now clear of any magazines. Her slippers slapped the tabletop as she mimicked the rickety-tat-tat-tat of Sammy Davis Jr., and she whistled something that was entirely unlike a real melody. The fat woman waved her arms as other patients swooped down on her—some trying to kiss her head and others biting her ears that peeked

out from her bowl cut. The ammonia fumes of piss wafted from the far side of the activities room.

The television girl hid her head in her hands.

Not everyone got excited. Several of the citizens could barely move from under the heavy tarp of chlorpromazine. The din of the others did not phase them, much less inspire them to commit petty crimes of distraction and noise.

Eventually, the King of the Exiles leapt from the table to the ground, grabbed one of the catatonics and started swinging her around, her arms locked like a Barbie Doll. When she left off from the senseless quadrille, her catatonic partner stood where she had started, bent forward slightly, tufts of baby-fine blonde hair askew. She cavorted cheerfully to the next lady—a younger woman holding a teddy bear. She wasn't a child. She was fully grown with a slender waist that formed a perfect bridge between her small tits and legs that could have held up skyscrapers. When the King grabbed her, the girl gasped and cried, shaking her head. "No-no-no-no!"

The King threw both arms around the girl's waist and squeezed her like a tube of toothpaste, shaking her so that her breasts bounced against the King's sunken and concave chest, where she had cut off her own breasts with a Swiss Army knife.

"I d-d-d-don't like to d-d-d-dance. Let me d-d-d-down!"

One of the more excitable patients jumped up like an orangutan on the table and flung the volume knob on the television, which meant it began to dream very, very loudly.

The television girl covered her ears.

This got the attention of the orderlies, who poured into the activities rooms like Keystone Cops with syringes. A couple of nurses slammed the door closed and hit the button that locked down the entire ward. The orderlies first grabbed the King of the Exiles as she hollered and jabbed her with the needle. She kicked and shouted, "Holy, holy, holy!" When they finally wrapped restraints around her ankles and wrists, she declared that she loved Josephine more than that traitor and her breathing slowed. The others were easy enough to capture and restrain. However, as the television had seen before,

they restrained several patients who were not agitated at all using chemical restraints'—shots.

But they did not restrain the television girl. She sat immobile and alone on the vinyl couch, watching the dreams of the television as they emptied the room around her. The room was now almost quiet, and the television dreamed of a familiar face: the girl with the black hair. A news show host announced that she would not be able to stand trial, cutting to a juicy shot of her sorrowing mother. Her attorneys and the judge had declared her unfit.

A nurse—the tallest one with thick arms and acne—stepped between the girl and the television. The nurse crossed her arms and wagged her stubby finger at the girl.

"Jane," she said. "You have to sleep sometime, you know."

She flicked off the television. It had no idea what happened next.

...nine, ten, never sleep again...